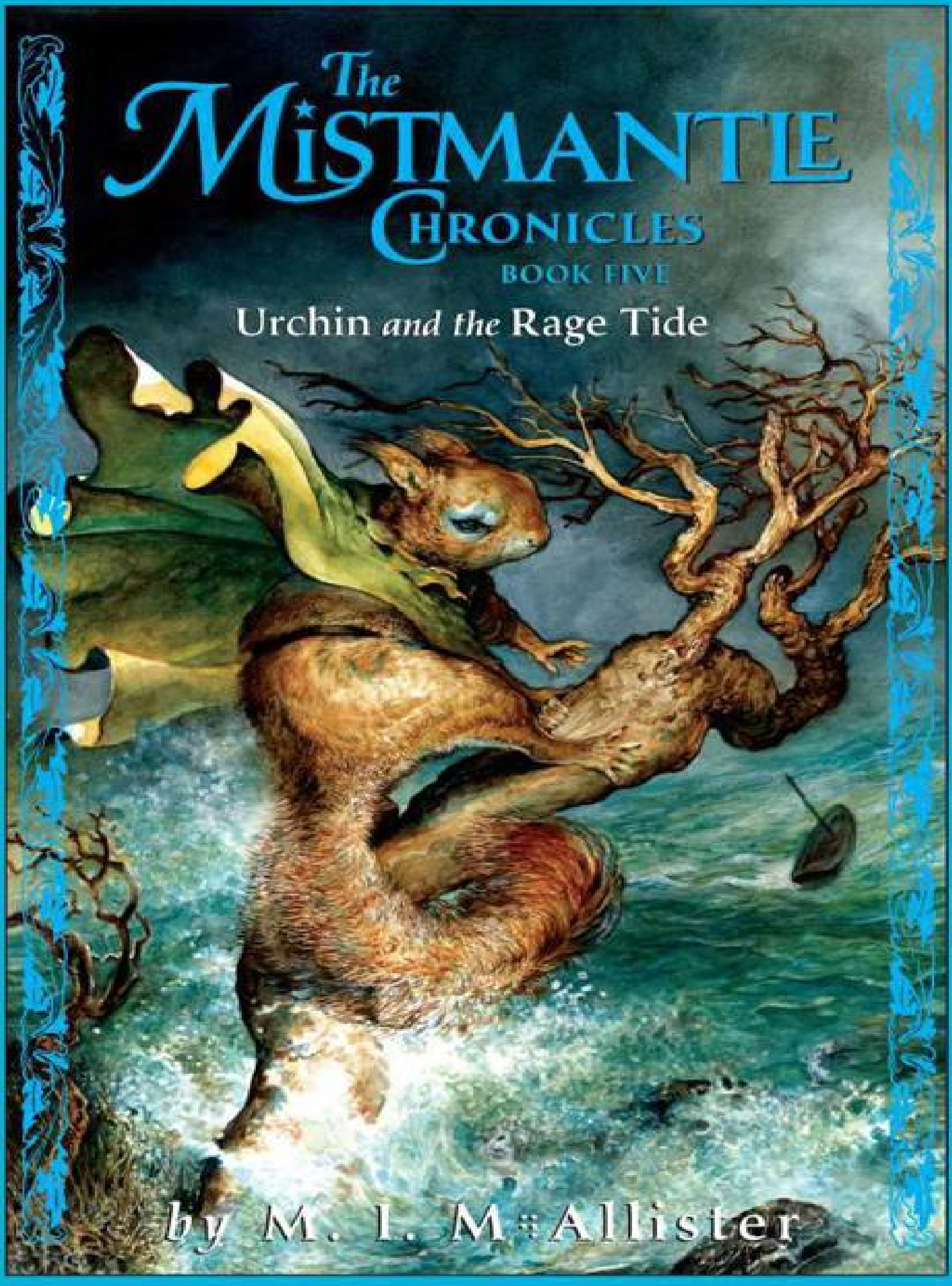
The Mistmantle Chronicles
BOOK FIVE
Urchin and the Rage Tide
by M. I. McAllister

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by

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For Becky, Adrianne, and all the young people they have brought to Mistmantle

PROLOGUE

OLLOWING THE RAVEN WAR, there were years of peace and plenty on Mistmantle. Summers were bright, and harvests so lavish that there was never a hungry winter. The sun sparkled from waters teeming with fish. It was the most wonderful time for young animals to grow up.

Urchin, Needle, Sepia, and Fingal were loved and honored throughout the island, and were like older brothers and sisters to Princess Catkin, Prince Oakleaf, and little Princess Almondflower. Juniper had become a wise and gentle priest. In those years, King Crispin the squirrel—Crispin Swanrider—continually toured the island, meeting animals in the woods and bays where they lived. It was as if he could never have enough of the island and its good company. Corr the young otter continued to train as Urchin's page.

As ever, the young learned the stories of their island. Enchanted mists surrounded Mistmantle, and few creatures found a way through them. No animal who truly belonged to the island could leave by water and return by water, and no animal had ever left the island in any way three times and returned.

Rarely, only once in very many generations, there was a Voyager, an animal who could come and go through the mists at will. Some animals thought that Mistmantle would never again have a Voyager. But others—King Crispin and Queen Cedar, Urchin, Padra, and Juniper—knew that there already was one.

Animals had their hopes, dreams, and secrets. King Crispin had a secret that nobody guessed. Corr dreamed of a bright, exciting future full of adventure. And a squirrel called Mossberry had strange dreams of power.

If Mossberry's dreams had stayed in his head, he might have done no harm. But already, his earnest speeches, his bright eyes, and the power of his personality were attractive to a few animals who believed whatever he told them.

Mossberry's dreams put all the island in danger.

CHAPTER ONE

OW THE DAY BREAKS through the night! Here is the year’s turning! Lift your hearts to the Heart! Greet the light!”

From an open window of the Gathering Chamber of Mistmantle Tower, Juniper the priest called out the ancient words. A cheer rang out from all the squirrels, moles, hedgehogs, and otters crammed into the tower; and the animals on the rocks below the window applauded, cheered, and hugged each other as the first streaks of morning light spread across the sky. In the highest turret of Mistmantle Tower, Hope the hedgehog and Scatter the squirrel lit a candle, set it in the window, and hugged each other for joy. Soon, candlelight glowed from every window in the tower. Everywhere there were ribboned garlands, holly, and evergreens.

This was a joyous time of winter. After the longest and darkest night of the year, the animals would gather to watch for the sunrise. It marked the year’s turning, and though there was still more winter to come, they knew that from this night on, the days would grow longer and the nights shorter. For days now there would be parties, feasts, entertainments, and gift-giving, to help them face the cold days ahead.

Juniper breathed in the dry cold with its taste of frost. As lanterns were lit on the rocks, he saw the soft sparkle of frost beneath them.

“It’s…so…so…so like something in a story!” gasped Princess Catkin as she came to stand at the window beside him. Her eyes were large and bright, and her whiskers and ears twitched with excitement. “Shall we go down?”

King Crispin and Queen Cedar were behind them. The king put his paws on Catkin’s shoulders.

“I’ll come with you, sweetheart,” he said, and soon bright-eyed mole maids were wriggling busily through the tower crowd, craning their necks to see over the heaps of soft white mantles they brought for any animals who wanted to go outside and greet the dawn. Young Prince Oakleaf took as many mantles as his paws would hold and threw them out the window.

“Urchin!” called the king as, with a flourish of his tail, he sprang to perch on the windowsill. “Are you coming?”

Through the crowd came a squirrel whose fur was pale as golden honey; and whose only deep squirrel red was on his ears and tail tip. On his wrist, he wore a bracelet of faded squirrel hair.

“I’ll follow you, Your Majesty!” called Urchin. With a swishing of red-gold tails, the whole royal family ran down the walls and began putting on the cloaks, which lay in a soft and tumbled heap on the rocks. Urchin followed them, and, reaching the ground, helped Princess Almondflower with a cloak so big for her that he had to find a mole maid to carry her train.

Juniper, who had a lame leg, found running down the walls difficult, and, besides, it wouldn’t be suitable for a priest who had just led an important ceremony. He came down the stairs and joined the others on the rocks, where all animal faces were turned hopefully to the eastern sky. They stood in little groups, holding up lanterns where the flames leaned and flickered in the draft. The pools of light made the frost glimmer with gold.

The otters stood nearest to the shore, the youngest twisting in and out of the shallows. Padra and Arran, both wearing captains’ swords and circlets, stood shoulder to shoulder and paw in paw. Their daughter Swanfeather danced in and out of the waves, while their son, Tide, kept an eye on his little sister, Fionn, who had found a frog and was watching it with fascination. Padra’s brother, Fingal, was pushing out his boat, the *Captain Lugg*, which was fully loaded with excited, squeaking little hedgehogs.

“One quick trip around the bay,” Fingal was saying. “Look out for starfish!”

Moles peeped up from tunnels, peered shortsightedly at the sky, grunted a greeting to any animal who was near, and went back to bed. But Tipp and Todd, the grandsons of Captain Lugg, stayed with their friends on the beach, watching the sunrise. Their friend Spade, who was a Circle mole, joined them.

“Daft idea, staying up all night,” he remarked, rubbing his paws together for warmth. “But I suppose you have to make the effort,” and they knew he was enjoying it as much as they were.

Urchin followed King Crispin and his family to the jetty where the waves shushed softly against the staithes. His old friend Needle the hedgehog—one of the sharpest and most skillful hedgehogs on the island—was bustling about giving orders to the pages.

“It’s time to serve the spiced wine,” she was saying, “and hot berry cordial for the little ones. And someone—yes, you, please, Pepper—go to Miss Sepia and tell her we’re ready for the choir.”

The choir were already gathering, holding out paws to help each other clamber to a high point on the rocks and giggling if they slithered or fell. Their white robes, gathered up in their paws as they climbed, gleamed clearly against the night sky, and in the poor light and the confusion of white robes Urchin couldn’t even see Sepia of the Songs, but everyone would recognize her voice when she sang.

“Urchin!” called a loud female voice. “My Urchin!”

It was Apple, his foster mother. He turned, smiling, to see her pressing through the crowd with such determination in her elbows that animals fell away before her. She wore a new embroidered cloak that Needle had made for her, but her hat was the same as ever, and as she drew near, Urchin saw that it was decorated for winter with holly leaves. No wonder her passage through the crowd had been so easy. She carried a lantern in one paw and was carefully adjusting her hat with the other.

“A happy dawn, Urchin, ooh, what a lovely dawn, too, what a night, all frosty, mind you don’t slip,” she said, and paused to take a few deep breaths before she could go on. “My Filbert’s just getting me a spiced wine, they do a lovely spiced wine in them kitchens, I just come to wish you a happy dawn, now, off you go, you should be with the king, or guarding something, or whatever Circle things you’re meant to be doing, you go and do your Circley things, my Urchin.”

Urchin hugged her (keeping a watchful eye on the holly) and did as she said. Juniper and the king’s family were now all on the jetty, watching as the sky slowly grew lighter. Princess Almondflower splashed her paws in the water, gasping and giggling with the cold. Urchin’s page, Corr, appeared from somewhere with a silver jug and cups on a tray, and Princess Catkin grinned at him and helped him pour the wine. She and Corr were old friends.

“Corr,” said King Crispin, “Urchin tells me you’ve completed your training.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Corr, bowing as he presented the king’s cup.

“And that you’ve done well,” said the king.

“Yes, he has, Your Majesty,” put in Urchin, seeing that Corr didn’t know how to answer.

“Then I’ll have to speak to him,” said Crispin, with a swift smile past Corr at Urchin. “See what we’re going to do with you next.”

A bell rang. Conversation died away, and all animals turned to gaze up at the choir. A sweet pure voice reached out like a swirl of silver.

Turn for the east and yearn for the waking,
Warmth after winter, light after night,
Turn for the east where daylight is breaking…

The rest of the choir joined in, then all the islanders, singing the ancient song of the turning of the year as their parents and grandparents had sung it. They repeated it, singing it in rounds and in harmonies, and before it was finished, the animals with young children were wrapping them snugly in their cloaks and carrying them home to nests and burrows. Soon, all except the tower animals were on their way home.

“Urchin,” said Crispin quietly as they walked back to the tower, “we need to talk about Corr. He’s growing up: it’s time for him to know who he is. Have a word with Padra—I want to know what he thinks about it. And Juniper.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Urchin. He turned to look for Captain Padra—the Senior Captain, and Crispin’s oldest friend—and saw him at the shoreline, beside Juniper. He would have spoken to Padra straightaway, but it seemed as if Juniper and the otters had something important to attend to. There was an air of concentration about them. They sniffed at the scents on the air, turning from side to side. Then Juniper waded out into the bitterly cold sea—Urchin shivered just to watch him—and stood waist-deep in the lapping waves, his eyes closed.

“Tide?” he said at last. “Come to me, please.”

Tide, Padra’s son, swam to his side. “Yes, Brother Juniper,” he said.

“Swim out a little,” said Juniper. “Feel the tides. Smell the air and water. Tell me what you think.”

“I’ll go with him,” said Padra.

As the otters swirled away Juniper waited in silence, stilling his mind, listening with his heart, sometimes dipping his paws in the water to feel for the tide. When he saw the otters returning he waded back to meet them on the shore, shivering and breathing wheezily.

Urchin took off his own cloak and wrapped it around him.

“It’s not good,” gasped Juniper hoarsely. “What do you think?”

“There’s going to be a rage tide,” said Tide, “but not yet.”

“He’s right, I’m afraid,” said Padra. “You can feel it in the depths. It’s still a long way off, but the currents are stirring. When it comes, it’ll be enormous. We’ll have floods.”

Juniper nodded thoughtfully. “I thought so,” he said. “But if it’s a long way off, we have time to make ready. We’ll tell the king after the festival.” Not tonight, he thought. The island faced a terrible flood tide, perhaps the worst it had ever known. But that was not all.

There was another threat, something unseen. Juniper frowned as he tried to concentrate. The threat was from within, from somewhere on the island. Not far away some great danger was stirring, and Juniper’s fur prickled at the thought of it.

Soon, the king must be told—but tonight, he could sleep in peace.

Mossberry lay on his back on a hillside and turned his face away because the light from the tower was in his eyes. But lights still flashed in his head and all around him, and he thought he could hear a voice—what was that voice? Was it the voice of Brother Juniper, calling out from the shore? But Brother Juniper was no true priest. He had tried to explain something most important to Brother Juniper, and Brother Juniper hadn’t listened. He couldn’t understand.

Whatever Juniper said, Mossberry knew himself to be different. He was called by the Heart. Why didn’t Juniper understand? He was Mossberry, the chosen one, and one day the islanders must follow him or die.

CHAPTER TWO

HERE WERE MORE DAYS OF PARTIES , music, and dancing, followed at last by the day when sensible animals—and even, finally, the not so sensible ones—began to tidy their nests, burrows, and chambers and settle down to catch up on sleep. On the third day, Crispin called together the senior members of the Circle to the Gathering Chamber.

Juniper stood side by side with Whittle the squirrel, who had taken over from Mistress Tay as the island's lawyer and historian. (Tay was still alive but very old, and Crispin had insisted on her retirement. She could still walk about her own chamber alone, but for anything more she needed a wheelchair, from which she growled, grumbled, and shook her walking stick at whoever annoyed her. She no longer attended meetings of the Circle.)

Urchin and Needle were there, and the three captains—Padra and Arran, and Docken the hedgehog. (Docken's wife, Thripple, worked with Needle on the Threadings, the pictures telling the story of Mistmantle, and their son, Hope, was Juniper's assistant.) Spade the mole was there, quiet and sensible, and Moth the mole, Mother Huggen the hedgehog, and Russet and Heath the squirrels. Padra's brother, Fingal, was in attendance, too, but Urchin could sense that he was restless to be out in the sea. Princess Catkin and Prince Oakleaf now joined in the Circle meetings with their mother, Queen Cedar.

In the years since the war, the queen seemed to have grown beautiful with a solemn, wise kind of beauty. More than ever, she looked like a queen of Mistmantle. Princess Catkin still liked a good argument, but had learned when to avoid one, hold her tongue, and listen, however difficult that might be. She even knew that she might not always be right. And Oakleaf was very much like a younger version of Crispin.

King Crispin was thinner, and his face narrower than when he had won his famous fight against the Archraven. Those who knew him well knew that his old wound from that battle still hurt him.

The king smiled. “Brother Juniper,” he said, “will you begin?”

“May the Heart hold us in love as the mists fold our island,” prayed Juniper aloud, “and may the Heart be in our council at the turning of the year.”

“Now let’s get the morning’s business dealt with,” said Crispin briskly. “Then we can all go and do something more important. Even you, Fingal. Padra, anything to report?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Padra gravely. “This is not good news, but the island has seen far worse. There is a flood tide to come, and more than a flood tide—there will be a rage tide.”

“Heart keep us!” whispered Mother Huggen. Fingal took her paw.

Urchin saw Moth bite her lip. Princess Catkin was looking anxiously up at her father.

“A rage tide!” said Crispin. “The younger animals here have never lived through one, or anything like it. I’m sure you’ve all been told about them—how the sea rises, and comes in on a rush. The waters sweep the island and wreck all that stands in their way. We’re not talking about any ordinary high tide, or a storm, even the worst storms you’ve ever seen. This is the full force of the sea, and a small island is nothing but a toy before it. Captain Padra and I both lost family in the last rage tide. Most animals did.”

“I remember that,” said Arran, with a glance at Padra. “Padra’s father and mine were helping to rescue the old and slow animals who couldn’t get away fast enough. Padra’s father was swept away to sea that night, and we found him on the shore in the morning.”

“I remember that morning, too,” said Crispin. He had never forgotten the way Padra had looked that day, a young otter promising to take care of his younger brother. “But that came in such a rush, with no warning. This time, we can prepare for it. Have you any idea when?”

“No,” said Padra, “but it’s still a long way off.”

“And from which direction?”

“I’d say from the southeast, Your Majesty, but it’s hard to tell.”

“Then that’s where we begin to clear the island,” said Crispin. “We must dig new burrows and tunnels in high ground. Squirrels must find the highest and strongest trees. Food supplies must be moved and kept in the

hills or deep underground in the driest and safest of caves, and the Mole Palace must be opened again."

"Won't animals panic when they hear about it, Father?" asked Oakleaf.

"It's up to us to keep them calm," said Crispin, "but they will have to know what's coming. Padra, set otters to patrol the seas today and learn all they can about the rage tide to come. They're not to discuss it, though. We'll let the rest of the island know when we've heard all the otters' reports. Dear animals, this will be a terrible time to live through. Lives will almost certainly be lost, damage will be done, and the days after the rage tide will be long and hard. Winter crops will need to be planted again and homes rebuilt. Spade, make sure we have plentiful seed stores in safe places, and not all in the same place, just in case."

"I'll sort it, Your Majesty," said Spade.

"Even so, there may be hungry days," said Crispin, and smiled to reassure them. "But we've faced treachery, disease, and ravens before. We can stand together through this. Now, members of the Circle, go with Captain Docken to the north tower to sort out strategies in preparation for the rage tide. Padra and Arran, Juniper, Whittle, Needle, please stay."

Urchin and Fingal left the chamber together after Docken and the others. Fingal slipped ahead to offer his paw to Mother Huggen, who was finding the stairs difficult, and Catkin took the shortcut out of the window, but Urchin paused to glance over his shoulder just in case there was some mistake. A gathering that included Needle and Juniper usually included him, too, and he wondered if the king had forgotten to ask him to stay. But Crispin gave no sign, and Urchin slipped out of a window and followed Catkin up the wall to the north tower.

"I shouldn't worry, Urchin," she said as he caught up. "They might be talking about you, but, I mean, nicely."

Back in the Gathering Chamber, Crispin sat down on the dais and nodded to the others to sit, too, and make themselves comfortable. Arran rubbed at her left hind paw as she sat down.

"Are you all right, Arran?" asked Crispin.

"I'll do, sir," she said. "This paw's never been the same since we saw off those ravens."

“Still, the ravens came off worse,” said Crispin. “I’ve sent the others away because we need to talk about captains. Decisions like this should be made before or after a rage tide, not in the middle of one, so I don’t want to appoint any new captains yet—but we need to consider who they’re going to be. We’ve already decided that we should have a captain for each of our four species.”

“Except that, if we do that, we might not be able to promote the best animals for the job,” Needle pointed out. “What if you had no animals in one species who are good enough, and two very good, um…”

“Otters?” Crispin smiled.

“You could always sack me, sir,” said Arran hopefully.

“Nonsense!” said Crispin. “We could have more than four captains, if it came to finding a place for an exceptional animal. Spade is utterly reliable. It’s time we had a mole. I know the moles haven’t wanted another mole captain for years, because nobody felt able to follow Lugg. But perhaps they’re ready for it now. Spade is sensible, good-hearted, and gets things done.”

“And I meant what I said, Your Majesty,” said Arran. “Padra’s a natural captain, but I’m not, and things have changed since I was appointed. Tide’s training as a priest, and I’d like to support him more, and I’d love to have more time with Fionn when she’s little.”

She didn’t mention the other reason, which was that her health had never fully recovered since the Raven War. Even the painful hind paw was something she rarely spoke of. But Crispin understood.

“I know your reasons, Arran,” he said, “but you’ve earned your circlet. Retire if you like, but you’ll still be known as a captain. Now, we need a squirrel. We have three excellent squirrels, Russet, Heath, and Urchin. Russet and Heath are older and have been in the Circle longer, and either of them could have been promoted years ago, but they’d refuse because neither of them wants to be promoted over his brother. We’d have to appoint both or neither, and at heart, I don’t think either of them want it. I think they both want Urchin to have it.”

“They do and he should, Your Majesty,” said Needle firmly.

“Ever since I first met Urchin on Whitewings, I’ve known he was exceptional,” said the queen. “Yes, he should be a captain.”

“I’m sure we all think so,” said Arran. “But look at us! Needle and Juniper are his best friends, Whittle and Urchin have always got on well, Crispin, you rescued him and took him under your protection, Padra trained him. You yourself wouldn’t be on Mistmantle if not for Urchin, Queen Cedar. We’re all biased, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but we’re right,” said Needle.

“Absolutely,” agreed Crispin.

“I’m only concerned that he’s young,” said Padra. “It’s a big responsibility for him.”

“He’s not much younger than I was,” said Crispin. “Look at all he’s done and all he means to the island, and let that speak for him. But I’m not going to promote him just before a rage tide. That wouldn’t be fair to a new captain. So we promote Urchin and Spade when all this is over, and in the meantime we don’t tell them. Are we agreed?”

They were. Crispin nodded.

“One other thing,” he said. “Corr has completed his training, and he’s turned out extremely well. Those who know him best have agreed that it’s time to tell him who he is. Juniper and Urchin will see to that. Animals of the Circle, you may go. Heart keep you.”

Padra had stayed behind to talk to Crispin, when there was a knock at the door. Scufflen, Needle’s brother who had just become a tower squirrel, came in and bowed.

“There’s a squirrel waiting to see you, Your Majesty,” he said. “His name’s Mossberry.”

“Mossberry,” said Crispin. “Thank you, Scufflen. I’ve promised Oakleaf a fencing lesson, but I’ll see Mossberry after that. Tell him to come back about midday, please.”

On the shore, Fingal sat on an upturned boat with Urchin and Corr, scenting the changes in the sea air. He knew that this was a vital moment and he should concentrate, but it wasn’t easy when the threat of a flood tide was

about. The currents and winds were confusing. Juniper limped down the beach toward them.

Corr, feeling strangely small and uncomfortable, swung his paws uneasily. With Urchin on one side looking out to sea and saying nothing, and Fingal fidgeting on the other, he could tell they had something important to tell him, and wished that they'd get on with it. Now Brother Juniper had turned up, too, and seated himself on a nearby rock. The priest! It must be something serious.

"Now, Corr," Urchin was saying, "let's go back to basics. What's the first thing we learn about the mists?"

That was too easy. Every infant on the island knew it.

"The mists are given by the Heart to protect the island," said Corr. "Very few ships get through them. And when anyone who truly belongs to the island leaves by water, they can never return by water."

"But some have left the island and returned," said Urchin. "The king's done it twice, and so have I. Juniper and Captain Lugg came back once—some guidance or special gift of the Heart has always brought us home. But nobody has ever, ever left three times in any way, and returned a third time, except…?"

"A Voyager," said Corr, wondering where this was leading. Urchin was doing what he always did—asking him easy questions. Then they'd get harder, and he'd have to think out the answers. Sooner or later, there'd be one that was too difficult and Urchin would help him to understand it. That was what usually happened.

"A Voyager, yes," said Fingal. "An animal who can come and go through the mists at will. Usually an otter. There hasn't been one since before our great-great-great-grandparents' time. I think it's every young otter's dream, don't you? I used to wish I could be a Voyager."

Corr didn't think an answer was required, so he didn't offer one. Then Urchin said, "Have you ever thought it strange, Corr, that you can stay underwater for so long?"

"No," said Corr. He just could, that was all. Some otters were very fast swimmers, some had a good eye for fishing or a good paw with boats, like Fingal. In Corr's case, he could swim long distances underwater. That was all.

“In the Raven War you swam right under the raven boats,” said Urchin. “No other otter could have done that.”

Corr felt himself blush, and shrugged to try to make light of it. He had scarcely left his home in a quiet little bay when he had been caught up in the terror of the Raven War. Remembering it made him proud and scared at the same time—it was as if it had all happened to another animal, not himself. Praise embarrassed him.

“How do you think you managed it, Corr?” asked Urchin gently. “Haven’t you ever wondered?”

That was it—the question he couldn’t answer. Urchin would help him out, as usual.

“Didn’t you see anything strange when you came up for air?” he asked.

“No,” said Corr. “I couldn’t see anything, it was always foggy.”

“Foggy,” said Urchin, “or misty?”

Corr’s paws and tail tingled. He tried to say, “I don’t know,” but his voice came out in a whisper, because at last he could see what Urchin was getting at. He felt hot, then cold, and was glad he was sitting down, because his paws felt wobbly. Brother Juniper was coming to face him.

“Corr,” said Brother Juniper, firmly, but kindly. “Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Corr did.

“Those raven ships were not *in* the mists,” said Juniper. “They were beyond them.”

“No,” said Corr. “They can’t have been.” It was impossible, because if those ships were beyond the mists, he must be…

Urchin laid a paw on his shoulder.

“Corr,” he said, “Mistmantle has a Voyager again.”

There was a long silence. Corr couldn’t very well tell Urchin and Brother Juniper that they were wrong.

“Don’t look so worried, Corr,” said Fingal.

“We knew you were a Voyager by the time the war was over,” said Juniper, “but you were too young to be told.”

“Please,” said Corr, “who’s ‘we’?”

“A pawful of us from the Circle,” said Urchin. “And King Crispin and Queen Cedar, of course. We kept it quiet. There’s no need to tell the whole island before you’ve gotten used to the idea.”

“Couldn’t there be a mistake, sir?” asked Corr. He looked out at the mists and thought of how far away they were.

“Absolutely *not*,” said Juniper.

“Then, Urchin, sir,” said Corr, “may I go away by myself for a little while, please?”

“Of course you may,” said Urchin.

Corr walked slowly along the shore, his paws behind his back. When he was a long way from the others, he slipped into the water and floated, looking at the sky.

He hoped that Urchin and Juniper were wrong, and knew in his heart that they were not. As a young otter cub of no importance, he had dreamed of traveling to strange countries beyond the mists.

So why, he asked himself, wasn’t he enjoying this now? As Fingal said, it was the dream of every young otter to be a Voyager. It was *really* being a Voyager that was too much. Voyagers were heroes and heroines of the past, rarer than kings and queens. Songs were sung and stories were told of them, and their pictures were in panel after panel of the Threadings. But he was only Corr, who had helped his aunt to smoke herrings until the day he had patched up an old boat and sailed to find the tower.

“Give him time,” said Fingal as he, Urchin, and Juniper walked back to the tower. “If someone told me I was a Voyager it would knock the backbone out of me.”

Urchin, feeling that someone was watching him, looked up and saw Sepia at the top of the stair leading to the Main Gate. As he’d just been thinking about her, he was pleasantly surprised—but who was that squirrel with her? Whoever he was, Sepia didn’t look happy.

“I beg your pardon, Sepia of the Songs!” said the squirrel, but he said it as if he were making a grand announcement, and not begging her pardon at all.

“Most gracious Miss Sepia! You are greatly valued by the king and queen, I know.”

“Good morning,” said Sepia, and took a step away from him. His fur was very glossy and bright, his ear tufts soft, his eyes deep and dark, his face elegantly shaped, and his tail full and graceful. His eyes were strangely bright. She felt he was looking at her as if he wanted to eat her.

“Can I help you?” she said, keeping her distance.

“My name,” he said, leaning earnestly toward her, “is Mossberry. You may have heard it before.”

She hadn’t, but she vaguely remembered seeing him. He wasn’t a squirrel you’d forget easily, and just now, he was too close for comfort. She took another step backward.

“Dear beloved of the king and queen,” he said, bowing with a flourish, “I am awaiting an audience with His Majesty.”

“Oh, then hadn’t you better go?” she said.

“The king wishes me to wait until noon,” he said, and frowned up at the sky as if he were impatient with the sun. “I must speak with him most urgently, but perhaps the Heart will graciously allow us until noon. I have a heavy responsibility.”

Sepia could tell that she was supposed to ask him what this heavy responsibility was, so that he could tell her all about it, but she wasn’t going to ask any such thing. She felt she’d much rather get away from him as quickly as possible, and was about to pretend she had to take a choir practice when she saw Urchin coming toward the tower.

“Oh!” she said. “There’s Urchin. I have to speak to him.” She turned to run down the stairs, and was flustered to find Mossberry following her.

“Urchin of the Riding Stars!” he said. “You *must* introduce me!”

“Oh! Not now!” she gasped, and, speaking much too quickly, went on, “Prince Oakleaf needs him at once, it’s most important, and it’s confidential, please excuse me!” And she fled.

“What’s the matter?” said Urchin as she ran to meet him. “Has that squirrel said something to upset you?”

“No, he’s just a bit strange,” she said. She took his paw and led him toward the Spring Gate. “And I’ve been telling lies, so would you like to go

and see Oakleaf? Because if you do I won't be telling so many lies. Or at least, not such big ones. But we'll go by the Spring Gate, not the main stair."

"The Heart speaks to me!" cried Mossberry. "I am the favored one of the Heart, and bring a terrible message!"

"And what is this message, Mossberry?" asked Crispin calmly.

Crispin sat in the Throne Room, with Padra to one side of the throne. At the door stood Scufflen, the young hedgehog page, ready with drinks and fruit should they be wanted. On this winter day a fire had been lit, and the logs crackled quietly under the bright flames. Before the king stood Mossberry, his head high and his eyes bright.

"Terrible things are to come upon Mistmantle!" he proclaimed. "The island must turn to me! I am the one the Heart has called to, and only I can lead the animals to safety!"

"And what makes you so sure of all this?" asked Crispin pleasantly.

"The Heart has told me!" cried Mossberry. "The Heart has entrusted this island to my care, and nobody else can save it."

"And how has the Heart told you this?" asked Crispin.

"In my dreams," said Mossberry, leaning forward earnestly. His eyes were brighter than ever. "And in my thoughts."

"Perhaps you should speak to Brother Juniper," advised Crispin. "We must not speak lightly of messages from the Heart, and Brother Juniper must be involved."

"Oh, yes!" Mossberry nodded enthusiastically. "There is no doubt at all that my message truly comes from the Heart, but you are right to say that I must speak to Brother Juniper."

"Thank you so much," said Crispin, but Mossberry went on.

"I have already tried to do so, but Brother Juniper will not listen to me," he said.

"Really?" said Crispin calmly. That didn't sound like Juniper to him. With his intense gaze and his tail curling over his back, Mossberry was an

impressive figure, but Crispin wasn't easily impressed.

"He needs my guidance," insisted Mossberry. "It's most vital, and will be more so, very soon, in the bad times to come!"

"Will you tell me what you mean by 'bad times to come'?" inquired Crispin.

"Oh, yes, I must!" said Mossberry. "A terrible rage tide will sweep across the island! You must all listen to me!"

Crispin saw the way Mossberry's paws curled and twitched. He said nothing, looking Mossberry in the eyes, giving him time to speak further. When Mossberry dropped his gaze, Crispin spoke slowly and firmly.

"Mossberry," he said, "we know about the rage tide. The otters are already tracking the course of it. They report to us regularly, and in the morning we—that is, the Circle and I—will announce to the islanders what the future holds. Nothing is to be said about the rage tide before then." He leaned forward, and spoke with quiet authority. "Absolutely nothing, by anyone."

Mossberry did not respond.

"I hope that's understood, Mossberry," said Crispin. "Animals will be told by the Circle in the right way, and at the right moment."

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Mossberry, as if he were taking bitter medicine.

Crispin stood. He nodded to Scufflen to open the door as a sign that the meeting was over.

"Thank you for coming to me about this, Mossberry," he said, "but we are already dealing with it."

Mossberry bowed stiffly. "I offer you my help and advice," he said, "for none of you can save the island without it. You will find that you need me, and then you must send for me. And my dear friend Miss Sepia sends her greetings. She urged me to come to you." He walked away with his head high.

"Sepia!" said Crispin, when Mossberry had gone. "He's making that up. Funny he should know about the rage tide, though."

"That's what I thought," said Padra. "As far as I know, none of the otters have said a word about it."

“Maybe he just knows things that the rest of us don’t,” said Crispin. “Some animals do. Juniper does.”

“Maybe,” agreed Padra, “but that doesn’t make him the favored one of the Heart, as he calls himself. He’s just an animal with a touch of sixth sense and not enough common sense. And a very high opinion of himself. Watch him, Crispin. He has such intensity. I don’t believe for a moment he’s a friend of Sepia’s. He’s the kind who wants to be the center of attention, and I suspect he’s as mad as a whirlpool and a sight more dangerous. If the whole island crashes down around him, that won’t bother him at all. I’d rather not even think this, but there’s a touch of Husk about him.”

All that day otters swam around the shores, sniffing the air and feeling for the currents, reporting back on the state of the tides. Spade the mole muttered about the blooming sea, and how there was far too blooming much of it. It should know how to behave its blooming self by now, he thought, as he examined tunnels to see how they could be broadened, and where new ones could be dug, so that animals and supplies could be moved inland quickly. In the tower, Needle and Thripple set about packing away the Threadings. Little Myrtle, who was by now an accomplished seamstress and embroiderer, sat on a bench at an embroidery frame far bigger than she was, rocking a little and humming to herself. Needle, rolling up a Threading, looked to see what Myrtle was stitching into her design.

“Ooh!” said Myrtle suddenly. “Please, Needle, I’ve sewn something I didn’t know about.”

“Yes, I see,” said Needle. There were times when Myrtle seemed to go into a trance and add messages to her work, even though she had never learned the Threadings Code and had no idea what the images meant. But Needle knew. Tips of wild waves stood out in the blue embroidered sea.

“It’s like an angry sea,” said Myrtle.

“Yes, and you’ll understand soon,” said Needle. “No need to tell the king. He knows about that.”

“MOSSBERRY!” exclaimed Sepia.

In Crispin and Cedar’s own chambers, a small group of animals sat together finishing supper by firelight and candlelight. The captains were there, with Urchin, Juniper, Needle, and Sepia. Outside, light snow drifted through the night sky. Princess Catkin and Sepia had curled up in the window seat to watch it when Crispin’s remark made Sepia whirl around to face him.

“Mossberry said that?” she cried.

Crispin laughed. “He came to me very full of importance,” he said. “He had all sorts of things to tell me, including the fact that you were his dear friend and had urged him to come to me.”

“I only just met him today!” cried Sepia indignantly. “And I couldn’t get away soon enough. He’s creepy! What did he want?”

Crispin turned the wineglass in his paws as if considering how much to say.

“He offered me his advice,” he said.

“Cheeky posh-paws!” cried Catkin.

“Not cheeky, I think,” said Crispin. “But certainly confused.”

“Only he doesn’t know he’s confused,” said Padra. “He’s deluded. He’s also convinced that he’s right.”

“About what?” asked Oakleaf.

“Pretty well everything,” said Crispin. “I sent him to you, Juniper. Did he turn up?”

“Not today,” said Juniper.

“Oh, and he was going to tell you how to be a priest!” said Padra.

“I have met him before, though,” said Juniper. “He came to me not long ago to tell me I should train him as a priest. It was impossible; he’s too full of himself. You can’t train an animal who already knows it all. I sent him away gently, but he was offended, nevertheless. There’s something about Mossberry that makes my fur bristle.”

“That’s how I felt,” said Sepia. “Maybe it’s that fierce brightness. It’s overpowering, and scary.”

“And he can see a bit more than the rest of us can,” said Crispin. “Sixth sense but no common sense, as Padra said. I wanted to talk to you all about him because he could do a great deal of harm. I’ll give him some fetching and carrying to do when we have to move everyone and everything inland. Catkin?”

Catkin turned from the window seat.

“Do you know why I’ve given him a job helping the tower animals?” he asked.

“Because you want to keep him where you can see what he’s up to,” replied Catkin promptly.

“Well done,” he said. “Who shall I send to keep an eye on him?”

“Urchin,” she said at once.

“I don’t think so,” said Crispin. “He might feel jealous of Urchin. Somebody older, of a different species, would be more likely to get him to settle down—and that’s what I want to do, calm him down, not catch him out. Docken, would you?”

“Certainly, Your Majesty,” said Docken. “I’ll set him to work with young Todd and a few moles—quiet, hardworking animals who won’t be impressed by his nonsense.”

“Excellent!” said Crispin. “Off you all go, then. Dismissed.”

They bowed, and left, with a swift exchange of glances and whispers between Urchin and Sepia. Urchin was the last to leave, hesitating for a moment.

“Urchin?” said the king. “Was there anything else? Anything you wanted to ask?”

There was, but Urchin hesitated. He would have liked to talk to them about Sepia—or rather, about Sepia and himself—but wasn’t sure how to. “No, Your Majesty,” he said, and bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty.” And he slipped out, closing the door.

The king and queen gave each other a knowing look. “How sweet,” said the queen.

Mossberry sat on a rock near the shore, wriggling with annoyance. The king hadn't listened to him. Pressing his paws into the sand, he curled his claws. Those tower animals didn't understand. How could they? They were all traitors. He was the chosen one to save this island. None of them had what he had—not the king (who was only king by accident), nor the priest (and nobody even knew who his family were), nor that jumped-up Urchin (who didn't even come from Mistmantle. Neither did the queen). He was Mossberry, a trueborn Mistmantle animal and the Heart's favorite, and the Heart had given him gifts they could never understand. Voices and music buzzed in his head.

He rose with a fierce intensity in his eyes. His work must be done, and nobody must stand in his way. He ran to Watchtop Hill, where he climbed a tree and looked out over the island as the tree swayed in the wind, rocking him.

It was no good trying to talk to those animals in the tower. They all thought they knew best, but he could always find animals who'd listen to him. He already had followers, animals who were weak and confused and knew how much they needed him. Really, he had to admit that some animals were not very clever and needed his help. Even now, from his high perch, he could see two hedgehogs—one fully grown and one small—standing paw in paw beside a stream. Their backs were turned to him, but from their hunched shoulders and bowed heads he could tell that they were miserable. The little one threw a handful of flowers into the water, as animals sometimes did as a way of honoring their dead. Mossberry ran down the tree and through the wood, so that he was in their path as they walked home. Standing in their path, he raised a paw.

"Heart keep you!" he cried. "The Heart has seen your sorrow! You have lost someone dear to you, yes?"

"My daddy," said the young one, tearfully.

"Beg pardon," said the older one. "It's not long since her father died, and we come here to throw flowers for him—how did you know we were mourning? Do I know you?"

“The Heart tells me things,” said Mossberry, “and your pain reached me.”

The mother hedgehog looked impressed. The little one shrank against her, holding tightly to her paw. Mossberry knelt.

“You needn’t be afraid of me, little one. I’m only Mossberry, the Heart’s servant. I think you are very like your father.”

“Oh, she is!” said the mother.

“Yes,” said Mossberry, gazing over the young hedgehog’s head. “I think I see him looking over you.” Both hedgehogs looked around in surprise. “You can’t see him, but he is close to you and very proud of you. His name…” He narrowed his eyes in thought.

“Quickpaw!” cried the little one.

Mossberry nodded slowly and thoughtfully. “Quickpaw,” he repeated, as if he had always known it. As the mother hedgehog wiped away a tear, he took her paw. “Tell me all about him. The Heart has sent me to comfort you.”

He settled down to listen to their story with a sense of satisfaction. He loved doing this; it made him feel important.

“I must leave you now,” he said at last. “I may be needed by other animals. If you, or any of your family, need me again, ask for Mossberry—Brother Mossberry.”

“Are you a priest?” asked the little one.

Mossberry smiled. He put a clawtip to his lips as if sharing a great secret.

“The island has no more need for priests,” he said. “The Heart has sent you Mossberry.”

He bowed, and ran away through the forest as if he were urgently needed elsewhere. He was practiced at scenes like this, and was sure that these two would join his other followers.

The next day, Crispin sent messengers to tell the animals of the coming rage tide. *We will all be calm*, was the king’s message. Yes, there will be

destruction and suffering, but we will do what we always do—we will look after each other. Don't be afraid. Simply pack what you need and be ready to move uphill and inland when the Circle animals tell you to. Have food and warm cloaks ready. Any crops that are ready to be lifted, harvest them now, to be stored on high ground.

Docken began to organize the evacuation of the tower. Mossberry was allowed to help under clear instructions and never left to work alone. But Mossberry needed little sleep and the word was spreading about wonderful Brother Mossberry. In the nights, he would slip to a cave in the cliffs, knowing that other animals would be waiting for him, hungry for his presence, desperate to hear him. He must not let them down. On this particular night, running through a tunnel to the cave, he could already hear their conversation.

"It's a good thing we have Brother Mossberry to look after us…." one squirrel was saying. "He told me my poor mother's still watching over me from beyond the grave, and that's such a comfort."

"He's good like that," said a hedgehog. "And he's not proud. He came to my tree root and let me cook his tea for him."

"I don't know what we ever did without him," said another, who was a little jealous because she had never cooked tea for Mossberry. "It's so good to have someone like that, a leader, telling us what's what."

"Yes," agreed a mole. "The king should listen to Mossberry."

"He really should," agreed a hedgehog. "He doesn't understand things the way Brother Mossberry does. Brother Mossberry will help him. Brother Mossberry will keep him right. The king's lucky to have him."

"But Brother Juniper's a good priest, isn't he, Auntie Cherry?" asked a small squirrel called Twirl.

"Oh, he'll do, I suppose," admitted her aunt, "but he'd do so much better if only he'd listen to—" she began, then gave a smothered shriek of delight. "He's here! Our master, Brother Mossberry!"

As Mossberry appeared in the cave the animals rushed forward, crying out with joy and reaching to take his paws, kissing his claws and pulling him farther into the cave. They smoothed his fur, sat him down, brought him wine, and settled hopefully at his paws, gazing up at his face.

“The Heart hears me!” he proclaimed, raising his paws as if giving a blessing.

“The Heart hears you, Brother Mossberry!” they responded.

“The Heart has spoken to me,” he said. “Dear animals, the Heart has chosen me to protect you. Listen to nobody else. All others are deceivers and deceived. Don’t trust them!”

“We can trust Brother Juniper, can’t we?” asked Twirl.

“*Brother* Juniper?” cried Mossberry. “How can he call himself that? He refuses to train me as a priest because he is afraid of me! He knows I am the true priest of the island, so he fears me. They all do.”

There were murmurs and shaking of heads from the animals. Mossberry went on, “Do you know what they’ve done? They’ve ordered me to do common work, fetching and carrying, that any stupid animal could do!”

There was a long “Oh!” of indignation. Somebody murmured, “Oh, Brother Mossberry!” Mossberry held up a paw for silence.

“Please, dear friends, do not misunderstand me,” he said. “It’s not that I mind doing menial, humble tasks for the island. I’m not too proud to load up boxes of turnips, or take curtains down. I will willingly do any service for the island. But they’re cunning, those tower animals. Captain Docken gives me these jobs to humiliate me—and, in humiliating me, he insults the chosen one of the Heart! When he insults me, he insults the Heart!”

The animals gasped.

“Yes, the Heart is angry!” cried Mossberry. “Angry with this island and angrier still because the king and the priest will not listen to me! But fear not. This is what the Heart tells you: *Love Brother Mossberry. Obey Brother Mossberry—whatever he says—for you can trust him. Do nothing without the permission of Brother Mossberry.* So you see, dear animals, the Heart has placed you in my care. I will save you from the anger that is to come. I will lead you to safety. And my command tonight is this—leave separately, one or two at a time, and take different routes. Nobody must know of our meetings, or the king will have me killed.”

The animals moaned and shook their heads. Mossberry put his head on one side and stretched out his paws.

“Let me be your…your leader,” he said. (He nearly said, “your king,” but decided not to.) “Your priest, your prophet, your guide, and your captain.”

“Did you fight in the Raven War?” piped up Twirl, and her aunt slapped her.

“Dearest Twirl,” said Mossberry, smiling down at her, “I will ask the Heart not to be angry with you.”

“Say thank you to Brother Mossberry, Twirl,” said Cherry. Twirl looked down at her paws and muttered something.

Mossberry lowered his voice, as if he were being spied on. “Gather in our shoreline burrow in two nights’ time. We must become familiar with the shore. Don’t all arrive at the same time, or by the same route. Be careful. You could tell the king about our meetings if you wished to. He does not know that his rule is over. I say to you—do not betray me. Do not betray each other. I am the Chosen One.”

Cherry bent over Twirl, who was sulking. “D’you hear that, Twirl?” she snapped. “That means you keep your mouth shut.”

Did any of them, except little Twirl, doubt Mossberry? Did any of them remember that the king and the tower animals had always been good to them, or that the Heart had always been kind? If they did think so, they didn’t dare say so. They were too much in awe of Mossberry.

CHAPTER THREE

HEN A FEW MORE DAYS HAD PASSED, it was time to evacuate the tower. A host of small hedgehogs and squirrels had gathered around Urchin, the smaller ones bobbing up and down to be noticed. He held a claw to his lips for quiet.

“Now, explorers,” he said, “have you all packed a bag, ready to move?”

The small animals gazing up at him all nodded solemnly, still watching his face. They each had a satchel on their backs containing a cloak, a drinking bottle, and the little possessions—combs, toys, and favorite treasures—that they wanted to take to the new burrows. The little girl animals all wanted to hold Sepia’s paws, until she seemed to have one clinging to every claw. Prince Oakleaf came to the help of a tiny squirrel whose satchel kept slipping from her shoulder.

“Is that the king?” whispered a hedgehog, curtsying.

“No, it’s his son,” said Urchin. “Everybody ready? Now, I need someone to do a special job for the king!”

A dozen or so small paws shot up toward the sky. Every squirrel stretched up very straight and tall, hoping to be noticed.

“I think that’s about everyone,” said Prince Oakleaf. “We have a box here of equipment from the tower to be moved to safety.”

“I’ll carry it!” cried a small voice.

“No, me!”

“Please, we can take it between us!” said two very small hedgehogs who looked swamped by their satchels already.

“Perhaps you could all carry something,” said Urchin. “That would be a great help to King Crispin and all of us.”

Delighted by the idea of helping the king, all the small animals reached out. Prince Oakleaf put a saucepan into one pair of paws and a bag of clothes-pegs into another, and hung a coil of washing line around the shoulders of an otter. Urchin saw the delight on their faces and pictured

them scurrying away later to tell their parents of how they'd helped King Crispin. Even the animals who had attached themselves to Sepia let go so that they could carry brushes, buckets, and rolling pins. One young hedgehog stretched out a paw, then withdrew it and seemed to think again.

"Oh! Excuse me, sir, I have to go and see if it's all right," he said, and scuttled away toward a burrow. There were sighs of "Oh, Pottle!" from the other animals.

"Pottle's always like this, Master Urchin, sir," said a hedgehog. "He always asks if it's all right with his mom before he does anything."

"It's for the king!" said another. "What couldn't be right about it?"

"It's fair enough," said Prince Oakleaf, "if he wants to check with his mom."

"Yes, sir, but then she always goes and asks somebody else," complained a squirrel.

"Somebody else?" repeated Sepia.

"Any particular somebody?" asked Prince Oakleaf.

"Don't know," said the squirrel, and the animals fell to discussing between themselves who it was that Pottle's mom always asked about things. They had decided that they didn't know who it was, but it definitely wasn't Pottle's dad, when Pottle scrambled back from the burrow, a bit out of breath, to say that Mom wasn't there; she must be at her friend's burrow, but he supposed it would be all right.

"That's better," said Sepia. "Now I need somebody good to look after the icing sugar sifter. Will you carry it, Pottle? That's right, in both paws. Mistress Crackle the pastry cook is most particular about it." And the little procession finally set off with Pottle at the end, carrying the sugar sifter as if it were King Crispin's crown. Needle and Thripple, who were bringing another batch of animals from the tower, joined them. From the baskets of brightly colored wools they carried, they were evidently clearing the workrooms. Myrtle the hedgehog and her little sister, Furtle—a wide-eyed, slender slip of a hedgehog—carried a rolled-up Threading under their arms. With her free paw, Myrtle led a tiny hedgehog clutching a paint box.

"He's my little brother," she said proudly.

"Heart keep him, he's such a little dot!" exclaimed Sepia. "He can't walk all that way!"

“We’ll take turns carrying him when he’s tired,” said Needle, “but we’ll do it carefully. His prickles are as sharp as mine.”

Myrtle’s little brother was gazing up at Urchin. He stretched up to whisper something to Needle as she bent to hear him.

“Yes, that’s right!” she said. “That’s Urchin of the Riding Stars, and that’s Prince Oakleaf. And the lady squirrel is Sepia of the Songs.”

“Ooooh!” said the hedgehog in a voice so soft and shy he seemed afraid to speak. Urchin knelt beside him.

“Hello,” he said. “I’m Urchin. What’s your name?”

“Ouch,” whispered the hedgehog.

“Oh, are you hurt?” asked Sepia, and Urchin looked to see if he’d stepped on a thistle.

“No, that’s his name,” said Myrtle. “Except it isn’t. Not really. Really he’s called Spirtle, but everyone calls him Ouch.”

“Why Ouch?” asked Prince Oakleaf.

“It’s because he’s so prickly,” explained Myrtle. “When he was little—I mean, even littler—if he cuddled up to anyone, they’d say ‘ouch,’ so it was the thing he heard most, and he thought it was his name.”

“Come on, then, Myrtle, Furtle, and Ouch,” said Urchin. “We’re getting the underground palace all ready for you. You’ll like it in there. Needle, is there anyone else to come from the workrooms?”

“Not exactly,” said Needle as they guided the animals inland.

“There was one squirrel who said she had to ask somebody’s permission to go. She’d vanished before I could ask her whose permission she needed.”

“I’ll go back for her, shall I?” offered Sepia.

Needle turned, shading her eyes. “It’s all right,” she said. “Here she comes. Russet’s bringing her.”

“That’s strange,” said Urchin. “Pottle the hedgehog just did exactly the same thing. Who gives them permission to obey the king’s orders?”

“We’d better be quick,” said Prince Oakleaf. “The otters are saying that the rage tide will come sooner rather than later. Speaking of otters, here’s Fingal.”

“Everybody move!” called Fingal. With a mischievous grin, he caught Furtle, hoisted her onto his shoulders, cried, “Last one up the hill’s a smoked haddock!” and led the small animals in an uphill charge. At the top, he put Furtle down, waved the others on, and ran back down, laughing, to help the stragglers. But there was no laughter in his face when he turned to Urchin.

“It’s going to be worse than we could have imagined,” he whispered. “The currents are getting more powerful all the time, and the more they build up, the faster the rage tide will get here. Could be later tonight or early in the morning, if not before, and it’ll be devastating. Is everyone out of the tower?”

“Russet’s bringing the last squirrel from the workrooms,” said Urchin. “She said she needed permission to leave.”

“Heart give us strength!” muttered Fingal. “Nobody’s going to give the rage tide permission to drown us all.” Looking up, they saw the animals at the top of the hill watching them, and waiting for their lead. Fingal raised his voice. “What are you waiting for? Down the other side and a good run at the next ridge! Keep going, all of you! Let’s get you all settled in before dark!”

“I’ll chase them up,” said Urchin. “Do you want to check the shores?”

“Yes, I’ll round up any stragglers,” said Fingal.

“And, Fingal,” said Needle, “if anyone says they need permission to move, tell them they’ve got the king’s permission. They don’t need anyone else’s.”

“What’s all this about ‘permission’?” asked Fingal. “Permission not to get drowned? I’m going to find Padra.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, and Urchin and Needle continued the trek inland. More bands of animals, from all over the island, were making their way to the places of safety, carrying bundles of bedding in their arms or on their backs. They had reached a steep hill, which meant that some small animals had to be carried, when Urchin noticed, from the corner of his eye, something moving on the hillside.

He looked more carefully. There was a quick, darting movement as if someone were trying to dodge through the heather without being seen.

“Needle,” he said quietly, “Oakleaf, do you see that? Over there.”

Sepia, who had fallen behind them while carrying a plump hedgehog in her arms, caught up. She put down the hedgehog, and watched. The squirrel, stopping once to glance over its shoulder, whisked out of sight into an opening in the hillside.

“And there,” said Prince Oakleaf, pointing to the right, where a hedgehog was scrambling up toward the same place.

“We don’t have any emergency burrows up there, do we?” asked the prince.

“Not that I’ve heard of,” said Urchin. “And they look as if they don’t want to be seen.”

“And there’s one of my little choir squirrels!” said Sepia. “Up there!”

Where Sepia pointed, a female squirrel was leading a smaller squirrel by the paw toward the hill, but the little one clearly didn’t want to go. She was pulling hard on the older squirrel’s paw, and straining to look behind her. At this distance they couldn’t see if she was crying, but she was certainly unhappy. The older squirrel finally picked her up, tucked her under one arm, and strode on.

“This is all wrong!” said Sepia.

Under other circumstances, Urchin might not have worried. It could just be a young squirrel having a tantrum. But there was definitely something odd happening.

“They all look very secretive,” remarked Needle. “Something’s going on.”

“And we could do without any furtive little meetings just now,” said Urchin. “They could be putting themselves in danger, and the little ones, too, whatever they’re up to. I’m going up there. Go ahead, and I’ll catch up to you.”

“I’ll come with you, Urchin,” said Sepia. “That cross little squirrel is Twirl. She’s not usually naughty.”

A little beyond them, a line of trees spread up the hill. Urchin looked up, chose a tree he liked the look of, ran up it, and leaped through the treetops with Sepia following, the thin branches bending and springing beneath them. At the other end they skimmed down and landed face-to-face with two hedgehogs who looked nervous, as if they’d been caught doing something they shouldn’t. Each hedgehog had a small satchel on his back.

“Good afternoon!” said Urchin pleasantly. “You’re moving inland, then?”

The two hedgehogs glanced nervously at each other.

“Yes,” said one. There was an awkward silence, then, “We’d better go.” They turned to trundle away.

“Just a moment,” said Urchin. “We need to know exactly where everyone is, in case anyone goes missing after the rage tide strikes.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said the first hedgehog quickly. “We’re staying with…” Unfortunately he said “family” at the same moment as the other said “friends.” They looked down at their paws, then, with some embarrassment, at each other.

“Family *and* friends,” said the first hedgehog.

“My friends and his family,” said the second. “It’ll be perfectly safe where we’re going.”

“Yes, but the Circle needs to know exactly *where*,” said Urchin patiently. “You could be in a shelter that would flood or collapse. Even high ground can collapse if it’s unstable, that’s why the moles have been so busy preparing safe places for us. Tell me exactly where you’re going to be.”

“We’ll be up in this hill,” said the first hedgehog sullenly, with a jerk of his head toward a burrow opening in the hillside.

“Yes, up in this hill,” said the other.

“And it won’t flood,” said the first.

“No, it won’t flood.”

“I see,” said Urchin kindly. He sat down, partly so that he wouldn’t seem like a member of the Circle being bossy, but also to make it clear that he wasn’t going to give up and go away. Sepia sat beside him.

“And who else lives in here?” he asked.

“Um…my friend does,” said the first hedgehog.

“And my sister,” said the other.

“Oh,” said Sepia. “Look!” The squirrels she had seen from the ridge were making very slow progress. The adult seemed to be avoiding attention and the little one tucked under her arm was wailing, kicking, and struggling to be put down.

“I was right,” said Sepia. “That’s little Twirl!”

“Is that her mother with her?” asked Urchin.

“No, that’s her aunt Cherry,” said Sepia. “Twirl’s an orphan.”

As the squirrels grew nearer, Twirl’s screams became ear piercing. Seeing Sepia, she made a determined wrench to get away.

“I want Sepia!” she cried. With a final kick and a twist, she forced her aunt to drop her. She tried to dart to Sepia, but her aunt caught her back paws.

“I’m sure you do want Miss Sepia, but you’re coming with me!” ordered her aunt. “Your friend Maple will be coming. Daisy’s coming, and Brother Mossberry will keep us safe.…”

Urchin’s ears twitched. *Brother* Mossberry?

“I don’t like Mossberry!” screamed Twirl.

“*Brother* Mossberry,” insisted Aunt Cherry, but her face fell when she saw the two hedgehogs looking at her, wide-eyed, shaking their heads. Clearly, she was not supposed to have mentioned Mossberry—the three grown-up animals shared the same caught-out look. Twirl had curled up, hugging her knees, her face set in a determined pout.

“The rage tide won’t wait for the truth,” said Urchin gently. “I think it’s best if you tell me what this is about, don’t you?”

Fingal found Padra and Corr patrolling the cliffs, scenting the air, and feeling for the direction of the wind. A distant voice made Corr stop, and look up.

“Hear me, and hear the Heart!” called the voice. “Come! My friends, friends of the Heart! Hear me! Stay close to me, and let me save you from the rage tide!”

A squirrel was making his way down Falls Cliffs, calling out his offer. His ear tufts twitched, his eyes were keenly bright, and his tail curled elegantly at his back.

“Who on all the island is that?” asked Corr.

“Oh, it’s Mossberry,” said Padra wearily. “As if we didn’t have enough problems. So full of his own importance that he has to share it with everyone else. Docken was keeping him in line, but he’s so busy, and Mossberry’s a slippery animal.”

“Is that a ‘slippery’ audience coming to hear him?” asked Fingal.

Corr could see what Fingal meant. Animals were slipping from caves and tunnels, glancing anxiously about them, then settling down to listen to Mossberry. They pressed back against the rocks as if they didn’t want to be seen.

“He’s good, isn’t he?” said Fingal, and as Padra glanced sharply at him, added, “I don’t mean *good* good. I mean, good at what he’s doing. The way an acrobat is good, or a juggler. Good at making animals stop and stare.”

“And making them listen, too,” said Padra. “That’s the trouble.” Fingal and Corr moved nearer; then Padra put out a paw for them to stop.

“Get down where we can’t be seen,” he muttered grimly, and they settled themselves long and low behind the rocks. “If he sees me I might put him off, and I want to see what’s going on. Whatever he’s up to, he won’t want the tower animals to know about it.”

“Hear the truth, the truth!” cried Mossberry to the little band gathering around him. “This is the truth you’ll never hear from the tower, because the animals up there, they don’t want you to know. There is a rage tide coming. Oh, yes, dear friends!”

“You’ll protect us, won’t you, Brother Mossberry?” asked a squirrel nervously.

“Trust me! Stay with me!” urged Mossberry. “I will bring you to perfect safety, but you must trust me. They’ve told you that the rage tide will come, but they haven’t told you *why* it’s coming! I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you why our island faces destruction!”

There was a pause for effect. Mossberry’s keen bright eyes scanned the watching crowd. Making sure that he had the full attention of every animal, he raised his paws.

“I tried to tell them at the tower, but they wouldn’t listen!” he cried. “They didn’t see any point in listening to me! The captains ignored me! Brother Juniper thought I could be no use to him! He’s training Tide as a

priest—and of course, Tide is the son of two captains—but he had no time for me! I offered to help them, and Captain Docken gave me menial work to do, fetching, carrying, and cleaning! Friends, they tried to humiliate me!”

“But everyone does those jobs!” whispered Fingal. “We all do! You do!”

“Sh!” said Padra.

“And what I wanted to tell them,” Mossberry went on, “is that the Heart is angry! The Heart is sending the rage tide to punish Juniper, the king, the captains, and all those animals who live in comfort and send us all to do backbreaking work for them! You, me, all of us, they make endless work for us all! Animals, the Heart has rejected them all and chosen me!”

Padra stood up. “Good afternoon!” he said cheerfully. With his usual good humor, his cloak flapping and his sword and circlet glinting in the sun, he strode up the hill toward Mossberry and his small audience. Fingal and Corr followed him.

“Heart be with you, Mossberry,” said Padra with a smile.

For a second Mossberry looked awkward; then he gathered his confidence.

“Oh, the Heart certainly is with *me*, Captain Padra,” he said.

Padra turned and smiled warmly at the gathered animals.

“And the Heart be with you all,” he said, and they couldn’t help smiling back. Padra was a long-standing, trusted captain who had fought for them and protected them, and his presence was always reassuring.

“What a rousing speech that was!” he said, and sat down on the rock as if they were all sharing a picnic together. “But maybe I’m just a bit dense—I don’t understand all this anger and destruction bit. The Heart is all loving, that’s what I always understood. And can someone just explain to me, please, what exactly is this backbreaking work that we make you all do?”

There was complete silence. Corr, looking around, could see from their faces that the animals were trying hard to think of an answer and failing. They all looked as if they suddenly needed to inspect the ground beneath their paws.

“Mossberry?” inquired Padra. “Can you help us?”

“I mean the poor tower animals!” cried Mossberry. “Those tower animals who toil miserably, day and night for the king and the court!”

“Oh, *those* animals!” said Padra. “The ones who lined up for tower jobs! The ones who come to me, and Fingal, and all the Circle, asking if there’s any work going at the tower, and please will we put in a word for them? The ones who sing while they run up and downstairs, and laugh a lot?”

Mossberry’s eyes narrowed with rage. He would not be spoken to like this, in front of his own followers.

“Those days are over!” he cried, tilting his head back. “No longer will animals believe the lies that come from the tower! Freedom! There must be no more groveling before the captains! All the animals will be free!”

“Sorry, free from what?” asked Fingal.

Mossberry ran up to the top of a small mound. It wasn’t very high, but it meant that he was looking down at the other animals and they were looking up at him.

“From slavery!” he cried.

“Slavery?” repeated Fingal. He looked down at his paws, then all around him. “Are there chains on *your* paws? Anyone’s paws? Are there guards coming to arrest you for talking rubbish, or me for listening to it? We’re not sent to work down mines all day, are we? *Slavery?*”

“It’s not so bad here,” said a hedgehog, timidly. “If we didn’t work, there wouldn’t be enough to eat. Fair enough.”

“My sister cooks at the tower and she loves it,” said another hedgehog. Mossberry glared at her, and she rolled into a ball.

“Just one thing, before we all, and I mean *all*, get up to safe burrows,” said Padra, standing up. “Anyone who wants to know what slavery really is, remember what it was like when Husk was in power! Or, even better, ask Urchin of the Riding Stars. He was a prisoner on Whitewings when King Silverbirch and his sorcerer had all the island terrified, and that really was slavery. If any of you have any complaints about the way the island is run, you are all free—yes, *free*—to go to King Crispin and tell him all about it. Nobody’s stopping you.” He gave Mossberry a purposeful look, which Mossberry couldn’t return. “Animals, if you have worries or complaints, take them to *King Crispin*—Crispin, who delivered you from Captain Husk,

Crispin, who has brought you safely through drought, landslides, diseases, and war, Crispin, who is always ready to listen to you. Mossberry, if you honestly do care at all for these animals, lead them uphill and inland, *now*! Good animals, you should all be in the safe burrows in the hilltops. We will be very happy to take you there. Heart keep you all!"

He turned to go. Fingal stayed for a moment.

"By the way," said Fingal, "if it weren't for Captain Padra, you might still be stuck with Husk. Coming, Corr? Anybody else?"

Two of the squirrels, not looking Mossberry in the eyes, ran after them. The frightened hedgehog uncurled and, after a moment's hesitation, scurried to Fingal's side. Fingal looked down, smiled, and walked away with it, paw in paw. Some followed, but the rest still gazed adoringly at Mossberry.

"We need to tell Crispin about this," said Padra to Fingal. "This is all he needs."

They found King Crispin at the burrows with Oakleaf and Catkin, organizing the job of sending sandbags—long canvas bags packed with sand to hold back water—around the island to be stacked up as protection against the rage tide. The idea was to roll the sandbags down a ramp to be collected at the other end. This had to be carefully supervised: a lot of small animals thought it would be great fun to roll themselves down the ramp, or wait at the bottom to catch the heavy sandbags, not realizing how dangerous this was.

"No littl'uns!" roared Captain Docken. "No squished hedgehogs on my watch! Oh, here's Captain Padra and Fingal!"

"Where's the king, Docken?" asked Padra. Docken jerked a claw toward a high rock. Crispin stood there with Urchin and Sepia, who were talking urgently to him. Now and again, he heaved another sandbag down to Docken.

"Your Majesty," called Padra, bounding up the rocks toward them.

"Padra!" said the king. "Urchin and Sepia have been telling me more about Mossberry."

“We just met him,” said Padra. “He’s crazed, and some of those animals are utterly devoted to him. They’re more concerned with gazing at him than with getting to safety.”

“Urchin and Sepia persuaded a couple of his followers to come here,” said Crispin “The rest seemed to think that Mossberry had a place of safety for them, but he’s up to something.”

“And they have *children* with them!” said Sepia, who looked close to tears. “Little Twirl from the choir was there. She wanted to come with me, but her aunt wouldn’t let her!”

Crispin kicked another sandbag down the ramp. “We’ve got enough to do without a squirrel with delusions of grandeur,” he said. “At any other time, I’d say we should watch him but leave him alone. That’s what I’ve been doing up to now. His followers would give up and go home as soon as they realized that no work means no dinner. But right now he’s too dangerous to be out, so—Sepia!”

Crispin called Sepia’s name, and he and Urchin both caught at her, because at that moment a violent gust of wind nearly swept her from her paws. The next was so powerful that trees bent, and all the animals ducked into the burrows. As it eased, they peeped cautiously out.

“That’s a warning shot,” said Padra. “And a sight earlier than we thought. Let’s get moving.”

“Padra, take a few good animals and bring Mossberry in,” said Crispin. “And bring in anyone who tries to stop you. All the Circle have to wear white tunics tonight so that any lost animals can find us, but put on plain cloaks over yours. Mossberry mustn’t see you. There’s a rage tide on the way, so we can do without his nonsense now.”

“Shall I go with Padra?” said Fingal.

“And me,” said Urchin, and looked up. Seagulls, and swans, flying to sanctuary, were swerving from their course across the sky. His fur prickled.

“You two have my permission to go, but I’m not ordering you to go down there tonight,” said Crispin. “And Padra,” he added, “and you, Urchin and Fingal. Don’t put yourselves at risk for Mossberry’s sake. Understood?”

The rest of the Circle gathered in an emergency burrow, where four heaps of white tunics lay neatly stacked on the floor. Thripple and two pages were giving them out.

“They’re all sorted,” Thripple was saying. “Mole, squirrel, hedgehog, otter, left to right. We’re all to wear them so we can be seen easily. We need to form a Ring of White around the burrows and keep watch for stragglers.”

“We have orders to put cloaks over ours,” Padra told her quietly as he wriggled into a tunic. “We’re not meant to be seen yet. King’s orders.”

Juniper arrived, and managed a twitch of a smile at Urchin, but Urchin knew that he didn’t feel like smiling at all. At times when the island was in danger, and when any evil was close by, Juniper always became dizzy and nauseated.

“You all right?” asked Urchin.

Juniper nodded bravely, but Urchin saw him take a deep breath. The sight of the velvet bag Juniper wore around his neck made his paws tingle. This bag held the island’s sacred treasure, the Heartstone of Mistmantle, which could be held only by a true ruler or priest of the island. It would fall from the paw of anyone else who tried to touch it. If Juniper had brought it with him, not even the Heartstone was safe in the tower.

“Heart keep you,” said Juniper, and the familiar blessing put a moment of calm into the hearts of all the animals who heard it. The Heart would not fail them.

“It must be time to form the Ring of White,” said Urchin. “It’s getting dark.”

“*Getting* dark?” said Juniper.

“I mean, late sort of dark, not just dark clouds dark,” said Urchin. “I think Docken’s onto it.”

“All Circle animals, form the Ring of White!” called Docken, striding into the burrow. “And you, too, Tipp, Todd, you can join us. Not you, Mother Huggen, we need you here.” He was about to tell Moth the mole that she was exempt from duty, too—she was small and delicate and looked as if the wind would blow her away—but she looked up at him with a glare that told him it wasn’t worth arguing. Her nephews Tipp and Todd took her paws.

“We won’t let you blow away, Auntie,” said Todd.

The wind was rising and the rain lashing as the Circle marched out to make a Ring of White around the burrows. Urchin, Padra, and Fingal pulled their cloaks around them and turned to walk into the storm, falling onto all four paws as the driving rain struck them. They were safer that way, and would make faster progress.

For the first time, Urchin saw what a dangerous mission this was. When every other animal on the island was being ushered to the highest and safest ground possible, when the rage tide seemed nearer and more terrible than anything they had imagined, they had to scour the island looking for Mossberry, who could be anywhere. While every instinct told him to head uphill and duck into the nearest burrow, he was in open country.

Urchin pulled his cloak more tightly about him, narrowed his eyes against the rain, and huddled his head into his shoulders. *King's orders. This is what comes of being a member of the Circle and a Companion to the King.* He remembered the days when, as a young squirrel, he would have given anything to go on a dangerous mission for Captain Crispin. The thought made him smile. All that excitement was still there.

Nearing the cliffs, Padra put out a paw for them to stop. A gust of rain and wind slashed across them. Urchin's ears stung.

"Have you seen something?" yelled Fingal, his voice whipped about in the storm.

"Can't see a plaguing thing!" Padra yelled back. "We may have to go back. I can't see anything in this rain!"

Urchin turned to look uphill. At first, through the driving rain, he could hardly see the Ring of White—but as his eyes focused he saw the dots, here and there, of white tunics, and animals weaving their way to safety. He had barely registered a flurry of red fur when Longpaw, the chief messenger squirrel, stood before him, rain pouring from his cloak.

"News from the king, Captain Padra," he panted. "He's been talking to some of those animals you brought in. Mossberry's hangers-on, or they used to be. Apparently Mossberry has plans to take his followers off the island. It's all been done very secretly."

"Off the island?" exclaimed Urchin. "Where to?"

"Plague, lice, and fire!" exclaimed Fingal. "They can't be mad enough to follow him!"

“They can,” said Padra. “We’ve seen him in action. He inspires them.”

“According to Mossberry, the Heart doesn’t approve of the king, the queen, the captains, the Circle, Brother Juniper, or anybody else except himself,” said Longpaw. “He says the Heart has told him that the rage tide is a punishment against the island.”

“For what?” asked Fingal.

“Heart knows. He says his followers can escape if they follow him through the mists to safety.”

“Plague and fire!” repeated Fingal.

“Then, he says, he can lead them back home through the mists. And they believe him.”

“Plague! Where are they now?” demanded Padra.

“He told them to get to the shore by sheltered routes, going underground where they could, so they wouldn’t be seen. It seems they plan to get out by Arder Bay.”

“Not far from where we saw him,” said Padra.

“There must be a way around the underground lake,” said Fingal. “Or over it.”

“Straight to Arder Bay, then,” said Padra. “Longpaw, tell the king we’re on our way.”

Fingal, Urchin, and Padra turned back toward Arder Bay. Steep rocks on either side sheltered them, but Urchin knew that soon, they would be on the open shore.

“If they absolutely insist on following Mossberry off the island,” said Fingal, “if they can’t listen to sense, how can we stop them?”

“We can’t, if they absolutely insist on going of their own free will,” said Padra bluntly. “But they do need to realize what they’re doing.”

“Killing themselves is what they’re doing!” insisted Fingal.

“That’s why we need to break the hold Mossberry has over them,” said Padra. “The waters will soon be chaotic, and if they think they’re just going to float back home through the mists because Mossberry says so, they’re dangerously mistaken. And they must *not* drag their children along with them.”

“It’s insane!” exclaimed Fingal, and muttered something about the rain. “To try to go through the mists? And tonight! Not even an otter would take the water tonight! Hail and fire, how can they do that to their children?”

“They’d go through fire and water for Mossberry,” said Padra. “He’s like Husk—bit of character, bit of dash, bit of something else, and some silly animals believing all he says. And he’s not at all sane.” He stopped suddenly, and pointed. “There!”

Below them, where the cliffs became shallower and the paths wider, a small trickle of animals could be seen winding their way down the rocks toward the coast. Fingal, turning his head away against the rain, said softly, “Look! The king’s sent reinforcements.”

Urchin turned to look. Here and there, in twos and threes, half hidden by the rocks, were small bands of animals. At this distance and in the shadows it was hard to tell who was who, but he could recognize Tipp and Todd among them, and Russet and Heath. He could just make out the outline of small boats drawn up at the water’s edge.

“Come on, then,” said Padra. “Crispin’s reinforcements are all keeping in the shadows, so it seems we’re not meant to be seen. I suppose the idea is not to cause a panic. So we get down to the shore quietly, around by the headland, and get there before the Mossberryists do.”

Fingal and Urchin followed him through narrow, rocky paths until Urchin felt sand under his paws instead of rocks, and the cliffs towered above him. The three of them pressed their backs against the rocks, staying in shadow. At a subtle movement beside them, all three reached for their swords.

“It’s only me,” said a low voice.

“Crispin!” whispered Padra. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“I’m not staying in a warm burrow while you’re down here,” whispered Crispin. “I need to be here.”

A small figure stood beside the king, and a little behind him. When Urchin saw who it was, his heart seemed to shudder and hurt.

He was usually glad to see Sepia, but he didn’t want her to be here, in the most dangerous part of the island, when all the other animals were safe. He wondered why King Crispin had let her come here—but Padra had just

said that animals might be willing to take their children beyond the mists. There was the little squirrel they had met on the hill, for a start. All the very young animals, especially Sepia's choristers, adored her.

He could see now why the king had brought her. She had asked to be there as someone for the little ones to run to, and Crispin had agreed.

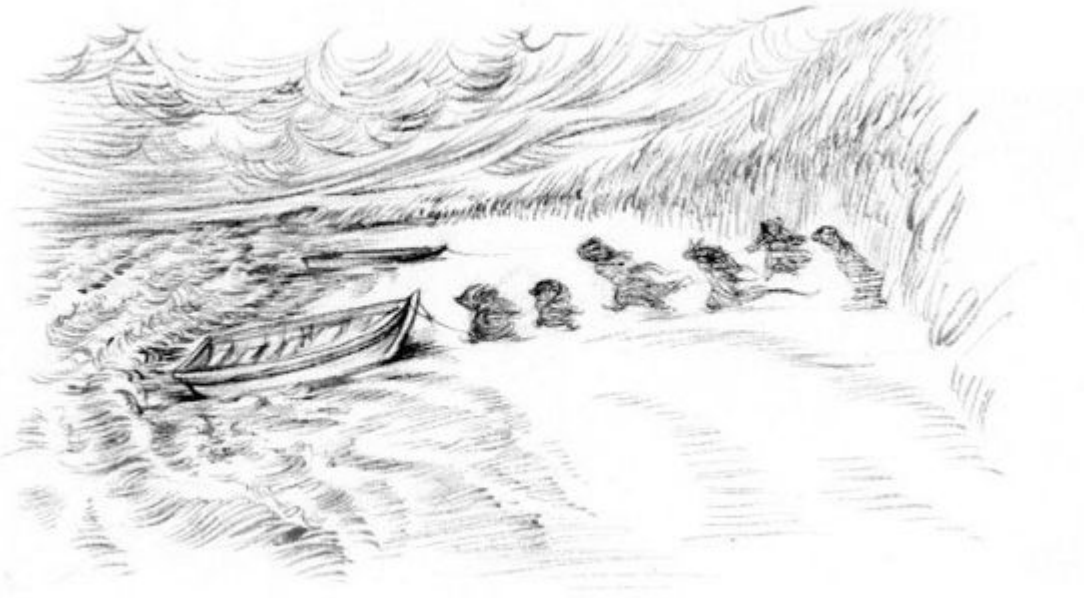
"There," whispered the king. "That cleft in the rock. That's where Mossberry intends to bring them out. I don't want to lose a single animal tonight, but if Mossberry insists on throwing himself to the waves, he will. I just don't want him taking whole families of deluded animals with him."

Sepia watched the opening in the rock, and Urchin watched Sepia. Once, she looked up suddenly as if she felt she was being watched, caught his gaze, and gave a nervous smile.

"Take care," he mouthed at her, and she nodded, still smiling. Not knowing whether she had understood him or not, he leaned his head back against the cliff. He'd been meaning to ask her something so important—in fact, he'd been putting it off and waiting for the best time—but he couldn't very well ask her anything here and now.

In the shadows, Crispin turned his head.

"Ready," he said, "but don't move until I do."



CHAPTER FOUR

ROM THE SHADOW OF THE CLIFF, a figure stepped out—a hedgehog, glancing one way and another. A squirrel followed him—Urchin remembered her from his childhood. They glanced over their shoulders as if looking to someone for guidance. Mossberry must be there. Two or three at a time, more animals came out—two moles, three hedgehogs, and a number of squirrels, some of them carrying little ones or leading them by the paw.

Urchin watched steadily, his claws curling with tension. He understood why Crispin waited, but even so, he wished he'd do something. Every one of Mossberry's followers had to be out in the open before Crispin would move; otherwise they would retreat into the hill. Once in the maze of tunnels on a night of flooding, they might never escape.

The animals were shuffling forward now, nearer to the lapping edge of the sea. Some glanced nervously at each other or hung back, but others had the same look of wild intensity that had been so disturbing on Mossberry's face. Finally, as one squirrel tentatively put her clawtip into the waves, out from the hillside strode Mossberry. He walked proudly, his head high and his back straight, his cloak thrown back from his shoulders.

"Mossberry! Mossberry, our master! Brother Mossberry!" cried the animals, but their voices faded away as Crispin stepped from the shadows.

"Good evening!" he said calmly, and nodded to Urchin and the others, who took off their cloaks and stepped forward. "Were you all lost in the hill? It's easily done. We came down to check if anyone was still near the coast. Good thing we did, you're not safe here. We'll take you to the burrows where you'll come to no harm."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" said a hedgehog eagerly, who was immediately glared at by the squirrels gathering around Mossberry. Two more hedgehogs shuffled, almost imperceptibly, toward the king. Urchin was sure they knew that Crispin understood all about Mossberry's plans. By pretending to think they'd been lost in the hill, he was offering them a way out of an awkward situation. Many of them would be glad of it.

Sepia stifled a gasp. “There’s little Twirl!” she whispered. “Her aunt has brought her here!”

The voice of Mossberry rang out, clear, strong, and passionate.

“Dearest animals!” he cried. “Stand fast, stand with me! Did I not tell you that this very thing would happen! They will not give you your freedom so easily! Have faith in me, and let me lead you to the true freedom that lies beyond the mists!”

“If you choose to leave the island,” said Crispin firmly, “you may do so, but I urge you not to attempt it tonight. Even the strongest of otters wouldn’t attempt to swim against this tide. I would be sad to lose any of you, and I can’t protect you if you go beyond the mists. You all know that if you leave you will never return.”

“That is the old lie!” cried Mossberry. “It’s the lie that they tell you to keep you imprisoned on this island! The Heart speaks to me, and the Heart has told me that we can travel freely in and out of the mists, even by water!” He whirled around to point at Urchin. “Hasn’t *he* done it?”

“That was an exception,” said Urchin.

“We are *all* exceptional!” cried Mossberry, stretching out his paws as if he wanted to embrace every one of them. “The Heart will protect us! Come to the boats, dear animals of Mistmantle. Let me lead you through the waters to the joys beyond the mists!”

“Islands with swans, islands with snakes,” said Crispin. “Other islands, much like this, but not so happy nor so pleasant. That’s what you’ll find beyond the mists.”

“The king and I have been there,” insisted Urchin. “We know!”

“They are lying!” cried Mossberry. “They have always lied! To the boats!”

Padra and Fingal had been turning this way and that, their noses and whiskers twitching. Padra turned to the king.

“Your Majesty, we don’t have long,” he said. “We have to move.”

Glancing around the gathering, Urchin saw that some animals were edging away from Mossberry. They trusted the calm and reassuring presence of the king, Padra, and Fingal. And, of course, there was Sepia.

“Come, good animals,” said Crispin gently. “I will not shout or scream at you. I will lead you and safeguard you, as I have before. Come with me.”

“Trust the king!” Fingal urged them as a hedgehog took a few steps toward him. “Hasn’t he risked his life for you in the past?”

From the corner of his eye, Urchin saw someone move. Twirl had taken advantage of the fact that her aunt was still gazing up at Mossberry intently. She had let go of her paw and, little by little, was edging toward Sepia. In a tiny movement, Sepia held out a paw to her. Urchin didn’t dare look at them directly. Even a look could give them away.

“If you must depart through the mists, I can only urge you against it,” said Crispin. “The decision is yours. But tonight, of all nights! The rage tide is coming, and you won’t survive it! Mossberry, do you care about these animals? If you lead them to the water tonight, you will be taking them to their deaths, every one of them!”

“Then we choose to die with Mossberry!” cried Twirl’s aunt.

“And the children?” demanded Crispin. “Do the children choose?”

A very young hedgehog began to cry, a thin little whimper as if it were trying hard not to cry at all. But that whimper was enough. A squirrel began a long, high wail, and another—then the voices of Padra and Fingal rose above them.

“The sea!” they shouted. “GET BACK!”

As Urchin looked up, the sea rose up as if it wanted to swallow Mistmantle. The waves became a towering wall rushing to overwhelm them. Crispin called on the Heart as he scooped up every infant he could reach and ran toward the cliffs. As the water surged over Urchin’s head, he saw Sepia snatch Twirl into her paws—then all he knew was cold and helplessness as the immensity of waves swept him up and flung him against the cliff.

With water pounding in his mouth and ears, Urchin scrabbled to find a clawhold on the cliffs. Fingal, fighting the current, felt the breath knocked out of him as he hit the rocks. Crispin, pain scorching through his old wound, bent over the screaming infants huddled in his arms.

“Heart keep me!” The cry was deep within Urchin, though he could hardly find the words—but the wave was retreating, and his head was above water. He gulped down the air, and tried to see where everyone was. Russet

and Heath were higher up the cliff than he was, reaching down paws to help him up. Padra was beside him, and he could see Fingal struggling to push a shivering little hedgehog into Russet's paws.

"Where's Sepia?" he gasped, and looked down over his shoulder. "Sepia!"

He could see her, but she was still near the bottom of the cliffs, gasping and bedraggled. Twirl still clung to her. Urchin turned, and edged his way cautiously down the cliff.

"Urchin, what are you doing?" yelled Padra. "There's a second wave coming!"

Urchin didn't bother to answer. There could be a dozen waves coming, each worse than the last, and it wouldn't matter. He couldn't leave Sepia. He could see the way she scrabbled at the cliff, trying to find clawholds. She should take a run at it—but Twirl was clinging to her with all four paws, and they were both heavy with water. Cautiously, he felt his way down the cliff and stretched down toward her.

"Take my paw!" he called.

"Take Twirl!" cried Sepia. Her voice was thin with the cold and her teeth chattered as she pried away the paws that clutched her. "Twirl, go to Urchin!"

Urchin pulled the screaming little squirrel from Sepia and tucked her under one arm. "Give me your paw, Sepia," he said.

Padra was behind him. "Pass Twirl to me," he said.

Urchin pushed Twirl toward Padra and reached down for Sepia. She was still struggling to climb, and hardly using her right paw at all.

"You're hurt," he said.

"My paw hit the rocks," she gasped, and reached up her left paw instead.

"Got you!" said Urchin.

He was pulling her to safety when the second wave roared over them, somersaulted him off his paws, and tore her away. Opening his eyes underwater, he could see no trace of her, and as he bobbed to the surface and shook water from his eyes, there was nothing but surging water, carrying him out to sea and then crashing him back onto the rocks. Salt

water coughed from his lungs and filled his mouth as Crispin and Padra grabbed him and hauled him up the cliff. He tried to call for Sepia, but could only cough.

“Get back, Urchin!” yelled Padra, dragging him back.

“Where’s Sepia?” he demanded, but it seemed everyone was heaving him farther up the cliff, farther from the place where Sepia had been. With seawater stinging his eyes, he strained to look out across the wildly rocking water.

Two of Mossberry’s boats bobbed in the sea—the others must be shattered by now. And, as he watched, he saw the small figure of a squirrel, half in and half out of a boat as the ebbing water swept it ruthlessly away.

“Sepia!” he yelled again, but through distance and darkness it was impossible to tell whether that really was Sepia, or one of Mossberry’s followers. He lurched toward the sea, but strong paws held him back. From the voices around him—some sobbing, some calm and firm—he knew that Crispin’s reinforcements had moved in to rescue all the animals they could. From somewhere to the left came a weak cry.

“Freedom!”

It was Mossberry. Rage shuddered through Urchin. He felt Crispin’s paw tighten. When he spoke, his voice was low and dangerous.

“Take him away,” Crispin ordered. “Guard him.” But his voice softened as he spoke to Urchin.

“Get back, Urchin, come to safety. You can’t help her. I’m so sorry.”

Without turning, Urchin knew that there were tears in the king’s eyes.

“We need to be higher up, Your Majesty,” said Fingal. “It hasn’t finished yet, there’s going to be another wave.”

They trooped away, climbing uphill silently, their heads down, Urchin still looking over his shoulder. Fingal stayed close beside him, not only to comfort him, but to stop him from turning and running into the storming sea to search for Sepia.

CHAPTER FIVE

N BURROWS, CAVES, AND TREE ROOTS, animals huddled together, too nervous to talk much, sipping hot cordials and trying to ignore the roar and crash from the surface as the waves surged higher over the island. Moth held her youngest child on her lap because he had woken up crying, but most of the youngest animals were fast asleep, wrapped in blankets on small makeshift moss beds. When Queen Cedar strode into the room Moth tried to stand, but Cedar waved a paw at her not to.

"Is the king back?" she asked.

"No, madam," said Moth. "None of them are." A surge of wind and rain above them made the trees creak. Moth wanted to say, *They'll be all right*, but she couldn't.

There was a slapping of wet otter paws. Padra opened the door for the king, and the queen gasped. Mud, sand, and seaweed covered Crispin and Padra, and the cloaks over their shoulders were torn and filthy. A soaked and crying little squirrel clung to Padra.

"Juniper!" called the queen. "Somebody, find Brother Juniper!" Already attendants were running about with towels and dry cloaks. Fingal stumbled wearily in, one paw across Urchin's shoulders. Cedar saw the shock on Urchin's bloodied face, and called again for Juniper.

"What happened?" she demanded, taking the little squirrel from Padra. "Where's Sepia? Wasn't she…"

"Where are her family?" muttered Crispin, flinging his cloak into a corner.

"I'll tell them," said Urchin. "It's my fault. I couldn't hold on to her." Then the whole room became silent except for the crying of the squirrel.

In the morning, animals crept out to see what was left of their homes. Torn branches littered the ground. Supple young trees had bent until they trailed the grass. Ancient oaks lay with their wide rough roots sprawled toward the sky, leaving burrows roofless and gaping. Animals gathered around Crispin, the queen, and the captains, telling of collapsed burrows, flooded tunnels, and wrecked workshops. In the worst-hit bays, neither a jetty nor a boat remained. Driftwood and seaweed had been swept inland and hung draped across bushes.

Members of the Circle counted animals. All the Anemone Wood squirrels were accounted for, except for those who had been determined to follow Mossberry. Some hedgehogs and a mole were missing, but no otters—Arran had intended to check for casualties among the otters, but she had been badly hurt by a falling tree, so Fingal and Swanfeather took over. A whispered conversation took place between Crispin and Padra.

"I'll go back to the tower, or what's left of it," said Crispin. "Padra, look out for Urchin. I'll take Needle and Catkin with me. Oh, and here's Hope."

Knowing that Hope couldn't see him at a distance, Crispin walked toward him.

"Heart keep you, Hope!" he called. Hope turned his head to the sound, and changed course.

"Heart keep you, and, please, Your Majesty," he said, "is it true about…" He lowered his voice as if afraid to ask. "Sepia?"

"She was swept out to sea," said the king gently. "There's been no sign of her since."

Hope slowly lowered his head—whether in a bow or in grief was impossible to tell—and turned to trundle very slowly away with his head down. The sight of that gentle hedgehog, walking away as if there was nothing left in the world worth walking to, wrenched at Crispin's heart. He waved a paw at a nearby guard.

"Where are Urchin of the Riding Stars and Brother Juniper?" he asked.

"Gone back to the bay, Your Majesty," said the guard.

"Of course they have," said Padra. "I'll go down to them, Crispin."

"And I'll go back to the tower with Hope. Send Needle to me," said Crispin heavily. "At least we can keep each other company. He shouldn't be

alone.”

The shore had become a mudflat. Cloaks, broken timbers, and loose stones lay trailed across it, and far worse things were to be found. Urchin and Juniper stood on a piece of driftwood with Corr and Tide at a respectful step or two behind them.

“Go back to a burrow and rest, Corr,” said Urchin.

“I should stay with you in case you need me, sir,” said Corr.

Urchin didn’t want anyone now, but he hadn’t the heart to send Corr away.

“Stay well back, then, Corr,” he said. Corr was too young to come near what lay before them.

Though Tipp, Todd, Russet, Heath, and the others had struggled with all their strength, not all of Mossberry’s followers had been rescued. Some had already been pushing out boats when the rage tide had risen up, and others had hesitated too long, and been caught up in the raging waters. Now they lay dead or dying on the beaches. Juniper moved from one to the next, checking a pulse here, covering a face there, instructing Tide in the prayers and comfort for the dying, and listening to their last words. Urchin, too, went from one to another, bracing himself to examine the faces of the dead, dreading what he might find as he gently lifted the soaked and muddy cloths that covered them.

“She’s not here,” he said at last. “I’ve looked at them all, and Sepia’s not here.”

“Then she must have been swept a long way out,” said Juniper.

“Maybe she wasn’t!” said Urchin.

“Please, Master Urchin, sir,” said Corr, “the sea’s at peace for now. Shall I swim out and look for her?”

“Yes,” said Urchin. “Report back to me.” He turned to Juniper. “That boat she was hanging on to was bigger than the rest. It wouldn’t overturn easily, or break on the rocks. Yes, Corr, go and look. Stay back from the mists.”

He watched Corr slide into the water and disappear under the waves. A line of air bubbles rose up. Hearing paws behind him, he turned to see Padra.

“What happened to Mossberry?” asked Urchin, though he could hardly bear even to say the name.

“He’s under guard,” said Padra. “He’ll be put in a cell in the tower as soon as there’s a usable one. And we’re keeping his followers apart so they can’t go on telling each other how wonderful he is. I think what happened last night has made a lot of them see differently.”

“Probably not,” said Urchin harshly. “He said it was a judgment against the island, so they’d just think he was right. Do you think he cares about them? Do you think he cares about Sepia?” Now that he had said her name, he couldn’t stop. “He pretended she was his friend! I should think he’s glad she’s gone, just because she’s a tower squirrel! When did Sepia ever harm anyone?”

“Urchin,” said Padra gently, “I wish I could help. Talk to me about Sepia whenever you want to.”

Urchin scanned the sea, peering toward the mists. “You’re talking as if she were dead,” he said. “We saw her hanging on to a boat!”

“But are you sure that was Sepia?” asked Padra.

“Of course I’m sure!” said Urchin. “Who else would it be? The animals who died have been washed up. She hasn’t been.”

“If she *is* alive,” said Padra gently, “she’s on the other side of the mists. She must be.”

“Yes, *alive* on the other side of the mists!” said Urchin fiercely. “And don’t tell me she can never come back, because I’ve got through the mists before, and Sepia will, too!”

Padra rubbed drying mud from his fur. He hadn’t the heart to contradict Urchin and tell him how unlikely it was that they’d ever see Sepia again, but he couldn’t agree with him, either. Turning to Juniper, he changed the subject.

“Any more casualties?” he asked.

“Hedgen and Scuttle the hedgehogs died,” said Juniper. “And Twirl’s aunt Cherry. Shell and Meadow are still alive, and I’ve given orders to take them to the queen, but I don’t know if they’ll come through. We got all the little ones out safely, though.”

“You see?” said Urchin, not turning his eyes from the sea. “That means Sepia’s the only one not accounted for! Don’t you see, as long as we don’t find a body, there’s hope?”

Padra stopped brushing his fur. “Urchin,” he said, “if you’re going to cling to that hope, you have to realize that it’s a very frail one. It’s most unlikely that she’s alive. If she is, she’s almost certainly beyond the mists.” He put a paw across Urchin’s shoulders. “We have to face that, Urchin.”

Urchin shook off his paw.

“If she’s alive, where is she?” he demanded. “She’ll be alone, in a boat with no food and no fresh water! Not even a dry cloak to keep her warm! Is there a swan left on the island who could fly over the mists?”

“They’ve all left,” said Padra gently.

Urchin knelt on the shore. It was as if, by gazing and gazing at the mists, he could make them disperse and show him Sepia.

Corr swam to shore, shook himself, said, “No sign of anyone, sir, sorry,” and ran to Padra. He knew what he wanted to do next, but he urgently needed to talk to Padra first.

In the flooded tower, Crispin and Needle waded waist deep through a corridor where seaweed floated on the water and a dead fish drifted past them. Fingal appeared, his fur wet, running up a staircase.

“All the chambers by the Spring Gate are flooded, Your Majesty,” he said. “So are the lower levels leading to the underground lake, but you can still get there from under the kitchens. I couldn’t get near the Chamber of Candles, but it must be flooded.”

“All the ground-floor windows are shattered,” said Crispin, “but the Throne Room and the Gathering Chamber have come out of this remarkably well. There’s a hole in the roof of Juniper’s tower, all the pennants and the flagpole are down, and we’ll have to find a small first-floor room to use as a prison for Mossberry.”

There was a scrabble of paws outside, and Prince Oakleaf arrived to perch on the windowsill.

“Father,” he said, a bit out of breath, “everyone’s accounted for, apart from Sepia, of course, and two small hedgehogs. Very small ones. They weren’t with Mossberry. They’d gone to safety.”

“Names?” asked Crispin.

“Furtle and Ouch,” said Oakleaf. “Myrtle’s younger sister and brother.”

“Myrtle!” cried Needle in alarm. “Our little Myrtle who does the Threadings!”

“Yes, Needle,” said the prince. “Her sister, Furtle, and their little brother, the one they call Ouch. They’ve disappeared together. The parents say they’ve always been close, they’re always wandering off together, and they always come back safely, but of course they’re worried.”

“I should think so, in the middle of all this!” said Needle. “And they’re so small!”

“Where were they last seen?” asked Crispin.

“They were perfectly safe in a hillside burrow with a lot of other hedgehogs,” said Prince Oakleaf. “It was dark, of course. They were reported missing at dawn.”

“Your Majesty,” said Needle, “we could look at the Threading Myrtle’s been working on. There could be a clue in there. We stored them all in Se—the cave above the waterfall.” The cave above the waterfall was Sepia’s song cave, but she didn’t want to think about Sepia just now.

Prince Oakleaf looked from one to the other.

“Sorry,” he said, “how would that help?”

“There’s something about Myrtle’s Threadings,” said Crispin. “When she’s sewing, she…” He stopped, hearing the swish of paws and tail in the corridor, followed by a call from Padra. “Padra! We’re in here!”

Padra appeared in the doorway and bowed to the king, but, seeing his grim expression, Needle felt a fear that made her legs weaken. She felt sick. She had never seen Padra look so grave.

Oh, Heart, please, please, she thought. *No more bad news. Please.*

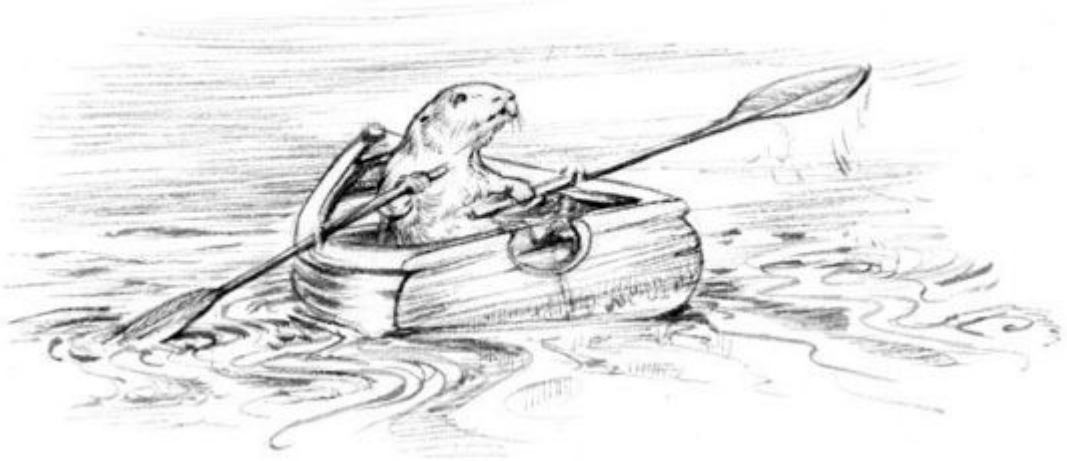
“I must speak to you alone, Your Majesty,” said Padra.

“Shall Prince Oakleaf and I go to the cave to find Myrtle’s Threading?” offered Needle quickly.

“Yes, please do,” said Crispin. “Explain to him about Myrtle’s Threadings, while you’re at it.”

When they had gone, Padra took a step back. He drew his sword, laid it across one paw, and lifted off his circlet. Then he bowed his head and, in the floodwater, knelt and offered the king his sword.

“Padra, what’s this for?” said Crispin.



CHAPTER SIX

ORR THANKED THE HEART for Fingal. Fingal had told him, as they had prepared for the rage tide, “More than enough Mistmantle boats have been smashed to firewood in storms before this. We should get as many boats as we can out of the way, so we need all the strong animals we can find to carry them inland. Got any big strong brothers, Corr?”

On Fingal’s instructions, Corr’s own little boat had been tied up in one of the galleried caves above the underground lake, and it was still undamaged. Launching it would not be as difficult as he had expected—the water level had risen so high that he would be able almost to drop it onto the lake when the time came. He whisked in and out of empty tower rooms, paying particular attention to the kitchen, and filled up his boat with all the food and fresh water it could safely carry. He’d need an extra cloak, too, but there was no point in searching through the chambers he shared with Urchin at the Spring Gate. Anything left in there would be floating by now. Anxious to get away quickly and unnoticed, he ran upstairs to see if anything had been left in the workshops.

The Threadings had been removed, but he climbed up to a high cupboard, and tugged hard at the door. It was stiff and opened suddenly, so that Corr fell over and a swath of velvet landed on him. He soon realized that Needle, Thripple, and some of the other workroom animals had moved some of their sewing projects into these high, safe cupboards. On trying to fold it up again, he found that the thing that had dropped on top of him was a cloak.

If Corr had known anything about fabrics, he would have realized at once that this unfinished cloak, made of deep yellow velvet and lined in white, was an exceptionally warm and valuable one. But all he saw was a very useful garment, the hem still tacked and the collar unfinished. Hoping nobody would mind, he bundled it up and ran down to the kitchen, and from there to the underground lake. With the tide still high, he could make his way out to sea from here.

Folding the cloak, he stowed it safely away. He mustn't draw attention to himself. The bay was full of otters, clearing up flotsam and jetsam, some of them in the small boats Fingal had saved from the storm. Nobody would notice another one, even if he did seem to be getting close to the mists.

His heart was beating hard and fast, and his paws shook a little on the oars. Inside, he still felt he was just Corr the otter. But he was also a Voyager on his first great quest, and like all Voyagers, he must go alone. He had made sure to pack a box of hazelnuts. Sepia liked those.

Crispin held out a paw to raise Padra, kneeling before him.

"Come up to the Throne Room, Padra," he said. "Water may be your natural element, but it isn't mine. Whatever you have to say, you can say it there."

They climbed the stairs to the Throne Room without speaking. Once there, Padra knelt again, placing his sword and circlet at Crispin's paws.

"Your Majesty—Crispin," he said, and his voice was heavy with sorrow, "I have let a young animal go into danger, without your permission."

"Get off your knees and sit down, Padra," said Crispin. "Tell me exactly what this is about."

Padra did not move. "I will stay here until I've told you," he said. "Dear Crispin, we went to the shore and saw the bodies of the dead. Sepia is not among them."

"Heart be praised for that," said Crispin. "So there's still hope, even if it's a faint one. I don't see how she could have survived that storm. Padra, if this is about Sepia, don't blame yourself. I was the one who took her to Arder Bay, not you. She asked to come—she was so worried about Twirl and the other little ones. I could have ordered her to stay away and she would have obeyed, but I let her come. If anyone should resign it's me, but I have made a vow to the animals of Mistmantle to be a good king, and they look to me to keep it. Put your circlet back on."

"It's not just Sepia," said Padra. "There's more than that. Corr came to talk to me in private. He knows he's a Voyager, so he asked permission to

go beyond the mists and search there for Sepia. He wanted to bring her home if he could, alive or dead, if a way could be found. Failing that, he could at least bring news of her."

"And what did you tell him?" asked Crispin.

"I told him to go," he said. "I told him to provision a boat thoroughly, and go. Told him to keep himself safe as much as possible, but I still told him he could go. He said he thought he should ask Urchin, and I told him I'd sort things out with Urchin myself."

"Fair enough," said Crispin.

"Yes, but Crispin—Your Majesty—I even said the same about you, when he said he'd need your permission. I told him he needn't worry about that. I told him, 'Just go, Corr. I'll sort it out with the king.'" He looked fully into Crispin's face. "That was overstepping my authority—it should have been your decision, not mine. Corr is too young for such an undertaking. Who knows what he might find beyond the mists, or what might find him?"

"I will always treasure what I found beyond the mists," said Crispin thoughtfully, and for a while said nothing more. Padra waited, knowing that Crispin was thinking of Whisper of Swan Isle, who should have been Whisper of Mistmantle.

"Whisper and Cedar both came from beyond the mists," said Crispin, "and it was a Mistmantle mole who murdered Whisper. Please, Padra, now that you've told me, sit down."

Padra flopped into the window seat.

"Why did you tell him he could go?" asked Crispin.

"Because he's our only hope," said Padra simply. "If Sepia is still alive somewhere, only Corr can find her. He's a Voyager, and sooner or later he had to use that gift. He might find a swan to carry her home, and even if she can't get home, he can help her get to safety on Swan Isle or Whitewings. She'd be made welcome there, and at least we'd know where she was. Corr could bring us news of her. The worst thing is not knowing where she is, and whether she's all right."

"So why did you keep this from me?" asked Crispin.

"Could you have sent Corr into danger?" he said. "Even for Sepia's sake? Your heart might have wanted him to go, but he's your subject, too,

and you are pledged to protect him. So I made the hard decision, but I had no right to."

"Yes," said Crispin, "but"—he looked past Padra out of the window —"what would I have done, if you were the king and I were the captain? I would have done exactly as you did."

"But I'm not the king and you're not the captain," Padra pointed out.

"So? You did the right thing. And if I have to make the big decisions, I'm making one now." He poured elderflower cordial into two cups and gave one to Padra. "I am not going to let you resign. We have enough trouble on this island without you standing down. Put your circlet back where it belongs."

"If you insist, Crispin," said Padra, replacing his circlet.

"And Corr—yes, he's young, but the young can do great things. I admire his courage, he has the spirit of a true Voyager, and, as you say, he's Sepia's only hope. Does Urchin know that he's gone?"

"I haven't told him, yet, for the same reason I didn't tell you," said Padra. "I believe he wants Sepia back more than any of us do, and for that very reason he wouldn't want to put his page in danger for her. It would be a terrible dilemma for him. By your leave, I'll tell him now."

"Does Juniper know?"

Padra managed a twitch of a smile. "I don't have to tell anyone what I've discussed with the priest," he said. "Not even you. And neither does the priest."

"Fair enough," said Crispin. "And how's Arran?"

"Growling curses against the rage tide," said Padra, "and a falling tree seems to have cracked a bone in her shoulder, so she's out of action."

"Pass on my regards to her. Urchin needs to know about Corr—leave it to me, Padra, I'll talk to him. He helped me in my grief, long ago."

Much later in the day Needle and Prince Oakleaf scrambled up to the cave where the Threadings had been stored. Needle, who had been there before,

had brought lanterns, and bustled about lighting them and propping them against the cave wall.

“The thing about Myrtle,” she said, “is that she puts things in her Threadings that she doesn’t understand. She barely knows her Threadings Code at all. But she’ll sit at her workbench sewing a symbol into her work without any idea what she’s done. But then it happens—whatever symbol she’s put in her Threading, it means something. When the king went to Swan Isle to fight the ravens, she stitched a sword pointing upward.”

“That means victory,” said Prince Oakleaf.

“Exactly,” said Needle, “but Myrtle didn’t know that. And she was right, we won. Then, when the ravens attacked, she drew the sign for the death of royalty and terrified me, but it turned out to be raven royalty that died, not ours. She doesn’t realize what she’s doing, but she’s never been wrong. So, in her latest Threading, she might have stitched something useful—I mean, something that gives us a clue about where we might find them, or even about Sepia!” She stopped, irritated. “Are you listening?”

Oakleaf was turning slowly around, his mouth open.

“It’s amazing!” he said. “Why have I never been here?”

He was watching the flickering of lantern light on the cave. Semiprecious stones blinked at them from the walls. Water gurgled from a spring. Needle, remembering how she had felt when she first saw the song cave, decided there was no point in trying to tell Oakleaf anything much just yet. She pulled out two rolled-up Threadings from the stack against a wall, and spread them on the floor.

“It’s so wonderful!” exclaimed Prince Oakleaf. “It’s beautiful!” His voice echoed from the high, arching roof. “Singing in here must sound amazing!”

Needle ignored him. She went on unrolling Threadings—*not that one—not that—not that*—finally, after studying one with great care, she dragged it to the lantern.

“Oakleaf,” she said, “do you know *all* the Threadings Code?”

“Don’t you?” he said in surprise.

“Of course *I* do,” said Needle, annoyed that he should ask. “I wanted to find out if you do.”

“My mother used to teach it to us like a bedtime story,” said Oakleaf. He examined it with his head tipped to one side.

“That looks like a circle,” he said, “and a boat.…Can we take them outside and look at them in the light? But let’s stay here for a minute. This place is so…so singable!”

With a clear, tuneful voice, he began to sing. In spite of his excellent voice, Needle covered her ears. She wanted to tell him to stop, but she hadn’t the heart to. Sepia had sung here, when they came to search for the Heartstone. This was where she had brought the young choristers to rehearse. Suddenly and powerfully, pictures of her filled Needle’s head and heart—Sepia was everywhere, Sepia singing, Sepia surrounded by excited little animals, Sepia cradling a baby princess in her arms, Sepia struggling to the workrooms with her arms full of yellow gold velvet, Sepia loved by the whole island, Sepia swept away and lost.

“Needle!” said Oakleaf. “You’re crying!”

Urchin’s mind and heart were so full of Sepia that it was hard to concentrate on anything for long. Finally he noticed that he hadn’t seen Corr for a while, and supposed that he must be doing some task for Padra or the king. Urchin didn’t mind. He didn’t want company just now.

The tree he had loved as a young squirrel was still standing, and he ran to the top to gaze over the island. Tide and Juniper were on the shore, their paws raised as if in blessing. Twirl was being escorted from the hilltop burrows by Urchin’s friend, Pitter the squirrel. Twirl looked no worse for her ordeal in the sea. Cedar and Catkin were climbing the stairs to the tower’s main door. Where would they all be without Sepia? The thought of her, alone, afraid, and perhaps injured, in a boat with no provisions, was appalling.

His eyes stung. *I couldn’t hold on to her.* He revisited that scene, time after time, always wishing it could be different, just a tiny bit different, so that he could hold Sepia and Twirl and haul them both from the water. But it didn’t make any difference. *I let her down.*

The tree rustled, and he looked down to see King Crispin leaping through the branches toward him. His first thought was that he wanted to be left alone, but at once he felt ashamed of that. He wasn't the only animal hurt by the rage tide, and there was work to be done.

"Do you have orders for me, sir?" he asked.

"Have you seen your page lately?" Crispin asked.

"No, Your Majesty," confessed Urchin, and felt ashamed again. Corr was his responsibility.

Crispin put a paw on his shoulder. "He's gone to find her, Urchin," he said. "Our Voyager has taken to the sea. His first quest."

"Heart speed him!" cried Urchin.

"And, Urchin," said Crispin, "you won't find her by gazing at the mists. There are two young hedgehogs missing. Needle and Oakleaf are on the search, and I want you to join them. You'll feel better when you have a job to do."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ORR HAD SWUM UNDER THE MISTS many times, but he had never realized that he was doing so. Deliberately rowing through them, with the soft white swirl leaving a film of shimmering drops on his fur, was very different. *I am a Voyager*, he told himself. The oars creaked and splashed steadily, as rhythmic as breathing. *I am a Voyager—or at least, that's what they've told me. I hope they're right*. He reminded himself that Urchin had needed to escape from the island once, and he had found a way to bring Crispin home—and it must have been harder for Urchin, who wasn't a Voyager. Well, he would find a way to bring Sepia home. But it seemed as if he'd never get out of these mists, let alone back through them.

He rowed until his arms ached and his paws were so stiff he could hardly uncurl his claws. It was hard to keep his sense of direction here, where the scents on the air were confusing, and there was nobody to ask for advice.

★

In the safety of the hilltop chambers, small children chased each other in and out of Mother Huggen's lines of washing. Moth told a story to those who would sit still and listen, but as three or four small boy squirrels were always trying to run up and down one wall, over the floor, up the opposite side, and across the ceiling without falling off, there were far too many distractions. A female hedgehog called Ruffle was supposed to help them but did nothing but huddle by the fire, and Mother Huggen would rather not have had her at all. Her cry of "can't we go home yet?" was becoming irritating.

"No, we can't," said Mother Huggen, and even she sounded grumpy as she folded washing and smoothed it away in baskets. "The otters say there might be another wave, so we have to stay here. Animals who live on high ground can go away, but Longpaw—Heart love him, he's Sepia's big

brother—he says nobody can leave without permission from a member of the Circle. And you won't get it from me."

"Nor me!" said Spade the mole, who was sitting beside her. "Pitter says she'll take some of the little ones out to play, but they have to stay on this—" He stopped, his head on one side as he listened. Then he slid to the floor and lay there, his ear pressed to the ground.

"Sh!" said Mother Huggen to the children. Presently, Spade got up.

"It's just the sound of the ground settling after the floods," he said. "There'll be a lot of that to come. Blooming floods. I thought it might be those young'uns we're supposed to be looking for. Carry on, Mother Huggen."

"Whatever have they done with that Mossberry?" asked Mother Huggen. Ruffle the hedgehog, curled by the fire, looked up. "Last I knew he was in a burrow just along south of this one, and I didn't feel happy having him so close."

"He's in the tower," said Spade. "They made a chamber into a cell for him. Can't spare enough animals to guard him, though."

"Ruffle," said Mother Huggen, "go out and hang up the next lot of washing, there's a love." Ruffle sprang to her paws at once, picked up the basket, and darted out from the burrow.

"Looks as if she's woken up at last," observed Moth.

Until the floods had drained and the ground had settled, very few animals were allowed near the shores and the tower, but Ruffle seemed determined to try. Captain Docken saw her hurrying through Anemone Wood toward the tower.

"Heart keep you!" he said. "Where are you off to?"

"Um—I—I'm going to—to the tower to see the queen, sir!" she stammered.

"You won't find the queen in there," said Docken. "She's staying at the burrows just now, with everyone else."

“Oh,” said Ruffle. There was an embarrassed pause; then with a shy smile she shuffled forward to go around him. “Still, as I’m here, I could go to see my auntie.”

“And where does your auntie live?”

“Oh, near the tower, sir. Very near.”

“There’s no aunties near the tower just now, love, and no uncles, neither,” said Docken. “It’s all out of bounds. Your auntie will be in the burrows. When I come off duty, you come back with me and we’ll find her. Who’s your auntie? I might know her.”

“Oh, she’ll be all right, sir,” said Ruffle quickly. “I’d better go.”

Docken watched her go. Ruffle was probably harmless in herself, but he had a feeling that she was up to something. Why did she really want to get to the tower?

Two animals who could always go to the tower, or more or less anywhere else they liked, were Urchin and Needle. In the workrooms, they spread out the Threading that Needle and Oakleaf had brought from the cave. In a room below, somebody was shouting and banging on the walls.

“Is that him?” asked Urchin.

“Mossberry? Yes,” said Needle, and pulled a face. “He can keep it up for hours. I wish they’d find somewhere else to put him. Padra says if we ignore him he’ll stop it, but it hasn’t worked yet.” She smoothed out the Threading. “Hope’s gone to bring Myrtle here.”

Myrtle’s last piece of work had been a picture of Queen Cedar, sitting on a mossy stone in the wood with Mistmantle Tower in the background. Hope brought in Myrtle, who was drying her eyes on a pawful of moss.

“Have you found Furtle and Ouch?” she asked, and sniffed.

“Not yet,” said Needle. “We need you to help us. Can you tell me anything about this Threading?”

“It’s Queen Cedar,” said Myrtle.

“Yes, we know it’s Queen Cedar,” said Needle with great patience. “What we mean is, do you see anything in the picture that you didn’t put

there?”

“Will you look at it very carefully for us, please?” asked Prince Oakleaf.

Myrtle finished drying her eyes and peered at the Threading. As it was lying on the floor she trotted around it a few times, stopping and starting and tipping her head to one side to look at it from different angles.

“That boat,” she said at last. “That round boat.”

“Good girl,” said Needle with a glance at Urchin. That was the sign of a Voyager, but they already knew about that. “Anything else?”

“There’s a circle thing,” said Myrtle. “I don’t think I did that.”

Urchin and Needle bent to examine it. The circle in the moss was hard to distinguish at first, but once they had recognized it, it looked obvious.

“A ring means safety,” said Urchin, “but there’s nobody in the circle. Who’s being kept safe, Myrtle?”

“I don’t know,” she said, and screwed up her face as she tried to concentrate. “I suppose it must be the moss. It must mean that it’s nice safe moss, please, Mistress Needle.”

Needle suppressed a sigh. “Here’s a bit of spare canvas and some charcoal,” she said. “Can you draw a picture for me?”

While Myrtle drew, Needle glanced around the workroom, hoping that Urchin wouldn’t notice and ask her what she was looking for. Sepia had been making a yellow-gold velvet cloak for Urchin, and had consulted Needle about it—Sepia had felt the color would suit Urchin better than the usual squirrel green. Needle had found the velvet for her, and had been helping her with the collar, which was tricky to sew. Hadn’t she left it in one of the top cupboards? She was sure she had. Perhaps Thripple, or one of the other seamstresses, had moved it. It was a lovely cloak. Sepia had even lined it and waterproofed it with resins, and for her sake Needle wanted to finish it, whether or not Sepia ever…*Don’t think about that*. To stop herself thinking about Sepia, she looked over Myrtle’s shoulder to see what she was drawing.

“An almond,” she said, so suddenly that Urchin jumped. “That’s your sister and brother with an almond, isn’t it?” Myrtle nodded and Needle turned to Urchin and Oakleaf. Almonds meant secrecy.

“That’s not a lot of help,” she said softly. “It probably means that Furtle and Ouch are somewhere secret, but that’s the problem.” She glanced over her shoulder again, then whisked around to look at what Myrtle had drawn next, and snatched at Urchin’s arm.

“Urchin!” she whispered. “She’s drawn a hellebore!”

Hellebore for danger. Urchin squeezed Needle’s paw.

Priest, captain, king. In Mossberry’s cell, there was silence at last. He lay on the floor with the phrase chanting itself in his head. *Priest, captain, king.* He had thought he was meant to be priest of Mistmantle, but to be priest was not enough. Priests of Mistmantle were quiet, gentle animals. If he could be a priest he would be a priest who ranted, shouted, raged, and made the animals fall to their knees before him—or rather, before the Heart, of course. He should be respected like a captain and honored like a king because the Heart spoke to him. It was his destiny. He must be priest, captain, and king. A fiery priest, a feared captain, an adored king. Such an animal would be the greatest figure in Mistmantle’s history, and it was his destiny.

He sprang up. “Priest! Captain! King!” he shouted.

Docken’s voice called back to him through the door. “Make up your mind,” he said. “Do you want to see Brother Juniper? If you want a captain, you can talk to—”

Mossberry picked up the chair and hurled it at the door. “We have no priest, no captains, no king!” he screamed. “Priest, captain, king,” Mossberry muttered. It was his destiny to be all three—or was there something even greater and stranger for him? Perhaps the task before him was not only great, but terrible.

Furtle and Ouch had always loved exploring. Being a bit on the small side even for their ages, they were easily overlooked in a crowd, which they liked, because it meant that they could slip away without being noticed. On

the night of the rage tide all the young hedgehogs had been in the hillside burrows listening to Mother Huggen's instructions—*Nobody is to go outside at all, that is the king's orders, do we all understand? You've been brought here because it's safe. If any of you were to go running off, we might never find you again.*

Furtle and Ouch had only half listened. Ouch had heard the bit about not running off, but that was all right. He'd walk. You could see much more if you walked. So at the very first chance, he turned and trundled slowly and happily toward a mossy patch against the wall.

Furtle had taken in rather more of Mother Huggen's talk than Ouch had, but she had always looked after her little brother. She'd thought she'd better see where he was going.

Ouch had prodded at the moss first with his snout, then scraped at it with his paw. He was most excited to find a crack in the wall behind it. It was very small, but there was just enough room for two tiny hedgehogs to squeeze through if they went one at a time and flattened their prickles.

"Oh, look!" exclaimed Furtle.

Ouch had found the most beautiful cave. It was wide and rocky, with white stone and twisted pale tree roots gleaming against the walls. A spring trickled down from a rock.

"I like it here!" said Ouch. "It's a bit too crowded in that big room, isn't it?"

Furtle twisted around to look. She could see a few prickles and hear Mother Huggen's voice, though she couldn't make out the words.

"They don't know where we are," she admitted, "but we know where they are, so that's all right. We'll hear if they call us."

Having sorted that out, they'd had a wonderful time. They had made their own little burrow out of pebbles and earth, but Furtle said they would need moss to make beds, so they went to find some. They hadn't needed to look far. A little more exploring had brought them underneath a spreading tree root, where the moss and soft earth gave way easily when they tugged at it. This had also released a clump of fat pink worms, which were delicious. By the time they had eaten and made their nests, Ouch was so very tired that his eyes could hardly stay open, so Furtle wrapped him in soft green moss and sang him to sleep. He had looked beautifully cozy like

that, so she had wriggled in beside him. Warm and fed, they had slept deeply. The slow, fine trickle of sandy earth in the burrow was softer than a lullaby, and had not disturbed them at all.

“I’m so sorry, Captain Padra!” said Mother Huggen, and wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron. “I don’t know how I managed to lose Furtle and little Ouch. I’ll never look their mother in the face again.”

“Mother Huggen,” said Padra, “come here.” He put an arm around her, carefully, as was best with hedgehogs. “You are doing a wonderful job, keeping order in a hill full of healthy young animals with too much energy and too little freedom. I’m astonished that there’s only two of them missing. Really, Huggen. You’re more capable and experienced than any of us. If it had been left to me, the whole lot of them would have vanished. Urchin and Needle are on to it.”

The end of the mists brought bitter disappointment to Corr. The sky was sullen with cloud, and soon a gray rain was falling steadily. Being an otter, he didn’t mind being wet, but he would rather have one good soaking than this constant dripping of rain. Soon it would be dark, and there wouldn’t be much chance of steering by the stars if he couldn’t see them for the clouds.

But long ago, Crispin and Urchin had taken boats beyond the island, and had had adventures, and if a squirrel could do it…He trailed a paw in the water to feel the pull of the tide, sniffed the air, and turned his boat in what he hoped would be the right direction, according to the course of the tide that had swept Sepia away. He sailed when there was a wind and rowed when there was not, praying for the Heart’s help until his eyes were closing.

When he woke up, he was still muttering prayers.

Urchin, Needle, Oakleaf, and Hope had assembled cloaks, food supplies, and flasks of water. Hope was to come with them because, as he said, he thought like a hedgehog but found his way like a mole, which could be useful.

“We’ll start from the hilltop chamber where they were last seen,” said Urchin. “We believe they’re somewhere mossy and safe.”

“That narrows it down,” muttered Needle.

“They’re small,” Urchin went on. “They can’t have gone far. Myrtle, you can come with us.”

“Is that a good idea?” asked Needle. Taking him to one side, she whispered, “She’ll only slow us down!”

“But if she calls them and they hear her, they’ll come,” said Urchin. “They might be scared of us and hide if they hear us coming, but they’ll trust Myrtle. And”—he turned and took Myrtle’s paw—“you’ll keep drawing pictures for us, won’t you?”

“She’ll draw snowdrops everywhere,” muttered Needle. “She’s got a thing about snowdrops just now. Look, she’s doing it already.”

“Good,” said Urchin. “They’re a symbol of hope.” Hope, hearing his name, peered shortsightedly about until he realized that Urchin didn’t mean him. “Ready, everyone. We’ll need another cloak for Myrtle.”

“And currants,” said Myrtle.

“Currants?” repeated Needle.

“Furtle and Ouch like currants,” said Myrtle. “We all do.”

“And currants,” said Urchin. “Provisions, lanterns, ropes, a cloak for Myrtle, and currants.”

Corr couldn’t possibly stay awake all the time. However hard he tried, flexing his paws and claws, standing up in the boat to stretch his limbs, and singing every song he knew, his eyes would close, his head would droop, and he would wake to find himself drifting off course. He yearned for someone to share the journey with so that there could be one rowing and one sleeping, and, when they were both awake at the same time, someone to

talk to. That would be good. He had never been alone for so long before, day and night and day and night and day. Sea, nothing but sea. Sometimes, when he felt his eyes closing and the dreams seeped into his head, he would jerk awake and pull on the oars as hard as he could. There were long, weary hours with no sight of land. He sometimes thought he'd be better off with a storm—at least, in a storm, he'd have to struggle to control the boat and bring in the sail, and he couldn't get sleepy while fighting for his life against a furious gale. It had never occurred to him that being a Voyager could be so boring. Another rainy night seemed to last forever, and he was glad of the cloak he'd brought with him.

The sky grew lighter. At first he thought the line on the horizon was only clouds, but it became clearer and stronger, and, unlike the clouds, it didn't change. *Land!* He sat up straight and rowed with new strength in aching muscles. Being a Voyager was suddenly exciting again. As the land became clearer, he hoped that it really was Whitewings. He knew nothing about the other islands in these waters, except that there was a deserted fire island somewhere—a dead volcano. He had no wish to arrive there.

He had not yet learned that land in sight is always farther away than it first seems, especially to a young animal already tired and aching from rowing. He felt he had been rowing forever before he could see any details—high, sheer cliffs rose up, with something that might have been streams weaving snakily down them. It didn't look at all like a promising place to land, but when he steered east, working his way around the coast, he felt a lot more hopeful.

This was much better. He heard the noises of a busy harbor long before he reached it. Hedgehog voices called to each other, oars splashed, and there was the steady thump and thud of cargoes being loaded and unloaded. Before he rounded the bay, he could see the masts of tall ships, their pennants fluttering in the breeze.

Gradually, Corr saw the bustling animals loading ships on the harbor. They saw him, too, and the chatter died away. Hedgehogs carrying crates stopped, and stood still to watch him. Squirrels ran up masts to see what was going on.

"Otter!" whispered someone. A small hedgehog looked up at his mother and stretched up on his clawtips to whisper in her ear. Corr remembered Urchin telling him that there weren't any otters on

Whitewings. The young hedgehog probably wanted to know what he was, and whether he'd bite. By the time he'd rowed to the jetty, most of the animals had gathered on the shore to watch him, and were reaching out to help him tie up the boat.

"Otter, aren't you?" called a hedgehog, who, from his sword and elegant cloak, must be a senior animal. He reached out, shook Corr's paw heartily, and helped him from the boat. "Welcome to Whitewings. I'm Morrow, I look after things at the harbor."

Corr stepped onto the jetty. His legs felt wobbly from sitting in the boat for so long.

"I'm Corr of Mistmantle," he said.

"Delighted!" said Morrow. "Mistmantle? How are you going to get back? Never mind that now, you've only just got here. Someone bring him wine! Bring him bread, bring him fruit! Bring fish! Fish, of course, I suppose that's what otters like, is it? It must have been hard rowing, all that way on your own! What's the news, and what's your errand here?"

As Corr told of the devastation of Mistmantle, the whole crowd seemed to want to look after him. They spread their cloaks for him to sit on, brought him food and wine, and sat down to listen to his story. (The young hedgehog, who had been frightened, timorously put out a paw to touch his tail.) When he told them of the rage tide, several animals nodded in sympathy.

"We had a rage tide here, too," said Morrow, "but nothing as bad as it was on Mistmantle. Your island must have taken the force of it, far more than we did. So what help do you need? Shall we try to send food? We can send a shipload if it can only get through the mists. Queen Larch needs to know about this. What do you need?"

"We need a different sort of help," said Corr, and told them, as briefly as he could, about how Sepia had been swept out to sea. But as he told the story, his heart sank. He could see no sign of recognition on their faces.

"Sorry," said Morrow. "She hasn't turned up here, I'm afraid. She would have been more than welcome if she had. But you should be taken to the queen. She'll want to hear of all this herself."

"I should go on looking," said Corr—but he knew it would be senseless to go on without a night's sleep, and he would need more

provisions and fresh water. He let Morrow escort him to the queen's home. He had heard of Urchin's trek across Whitewings in the bad old days of King Silverbirch, but this was very different. Where there had been wasteland, now crops, trees, and flowers grew; and Morrow seemed keen to show it all off to him as they walked. Trees had been planted in earth brought from Mistmantle and were growing well, wheat and flowers thrived where there had been silver mines. Corr would have thoroughly enjoyed it all if he hadn't been wondering how soon he could leave, and go on looking for Sepia.

"Queen Larch lives in the new palace," said Morrow. "She's talking of giving it a grand new name, but she's not telling anyone what it is yet. It's only just finished being built. Her Majesty insisted that the rest of the island had to be restored before she had a palace to live in. Spent most of her reign up to now in an overcrowded burrow like everyone else. Here it is now. You'll see Her Majesty's mighty fond of flowers. They never grew much on this island in King Silverbirch's time. If you could grow solid silver daisies he would have had any number of those, but he couldn't see the point in anything colorful. You can see the palace from here."

In fact Corr couldn't see the palace at all, but only the cascade of flowers in front of it. As he came closer he saw that behind the terraced garden lay the sprawling and upturned roots of a fallen tree. "Fell down when the earthquake struck," said Morrow. The palace had been built into the roots. It could only be approached through the gardens, where a female hedgehog was hoeing out weeds. When she looked up, she smiled in delight.

"An otter!" she said. "From Mistmantle?"

"Your Majesty," said Morrow, bowing. "This is Corr of Mistmantle."

The queen! thought Corr, who had taken her for a gardener. He knelt, but his legs were so tired and sore that getting up again was a painful struggle.

"Corr is on a quest," said Morrow. "He's looking for a missing squirrel."

"Oh?" said Larch.

"Her name is Sepia, Your Majesty," said Corr.

“Sepia!” The queen’s eyes widened, and Corr’s heart leaped with hope. “Sepia of the Songs?”

“You’ve seen her?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she said, “I’m sorry, I haven’t seen her since the Raven War, but I remember her well. Tell me all about this!”

She brought him into the shade of the tree root palace and sent for a drink made mostly of borage—it tasted horrible, but Corr soon felt better for drinking it. When he had told the queen his story, she shook her head.

“Sepia was one of those squirrels who has more to her than most,” she said. “Cedar was very fond of her. For her sake, I wish she had been washed up on the shores of my island. She still may be, and I can set a watch for her, just in case. And, if there’s any news, I’ll send a swan to Mistmantle. But she isn’t here now.”

Until now, Corr had only felt sore and tired. Now he felt heavy. He didn’t know where to search next, and told himself to think. What next?

“If she isn’t on Whitewings,” he said, thinking aloud, “where should I go now?”

“Nowhere, until you’ve recovered your strength,” she said firmly. “You’ll be no use to Sepia if you collapse at sea. There’s the old Ashfire—I’ve heard that there’s not much of it left now. But there’s always Swan Isle.”

That made sense to Corr. Swan Isle was in the opposite direction.

“And if she did get there, she’d find friends,” the queen went on. “The swans are eternally thankful to Mistmantle.”

“I’ll try to find it,” he said. “King Crispin said there were other islands in those waters, but I don’t think she’d survive long on any of them.”

The queen put a gentle paw on his shoulder. “Rest tonight, Corr,” she said. “Tomorrow, we will refill your stores. Sleep here tonight. And, when you leave us, take this.”

She opened a dark wooden chest in which Corr could see a row of small, plain earthenware pots. She lifted one out, and, even though it was still sealed, the aroma of honey drifted from it.

“Keep this safely,” she said. “This is the best honey from the bees in my herb garden. It is excellent for restoring health, so it will help her if you

find her weak, injured, or distressed—and you, too, if you need it to renew your energy on your journey. Now sleep."

That night, for the first time since the rage tide, Corr slept a long, deep sleep. In the morning, Queen Larch herself took him to his boat.

"Your Majesty," he said as he took up the oars. "May I—do you mind if I ask—what do you mean to call the palace?"

"The House of the Marked Squirrel," she said. Corr managed to smile.

"I'll tell Urchin," he said, and stepped into the boat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RCHIN , NEEDLE, AND HOPE scrambled up to the hilltop shelter where Furtle and Ouch had last been seen. Myrtle was having difficulty keeping up, so they took turns carrying her on their backs.

“Furtle!” she called. “Ouch!”

“Louder, please,” said Urchin.

“Furtle!” yelled Myrtle. “Ouch, ouch, OUCH!”

“That’s enough, Myrtle,” said Needle. “It’s all right for you, Urchin, she’s not right next to your left ear.”

“Sh!” said Hope, and added, “Please.” He stopped, and put his ear to the ground, listening. He held out a paw for them to wait, ran a little farther, and listened again. “There’s something there, a cave or something, but I can’t tell how to get in. We’ll have to go through the nursery.”

It must have been time for a nap, as babies were being settled into nests and sung to. Seeing the visitors, Mother Huggen and Moth both put their claws to their lips. Hope raised his head, sniffed, and scurried straight to the back wall. He tapped it with his claws, turning his head to listen.

“He has to do that,” said Urchin quietly to Mother Huggen. “He’s trying to find Furtle and Ouch.”

Mother Huggen nodded approvingly. “He’ll find them, if anyone can,” she said.

“He’s as good as a mole,” said Moth.

“This way!” called Hope. A row of half-asleep hedgehogs sat up to watch.

Mother Huggen didn’t seem to mind about the little ones waking up. She hurried over and crouched stiffly to see what Hope had found.

“There’s a crack in the wall here,” said Hope. “It’s very little.”

“I still can’t see it,” said Mother Huggen, squinting at the wall. “But if you say it’s there, I’ll take your word for it.”

“It’s tiny,” said Hope. “Most full-grown animals wouldn’t be able to get in, but it’s hollow behind. It’s a cave, I think. Furtle and Ouch could have found their way in.”

“I couldn’t get in there,” said Urchin. “Neither could you, Needle.”

“I could!” said Myrtle hopefully.

“I think I might,” said Moth. She took off her apron and lay down to look at the gap. “Could I dig it out a bit more?”

Just then, the floor and walls of the cave began to shake.

“Get back!” shouted Hope. “Everyone, back!”

Babies were snatched from their nests. Needle and Urchin, their arms full of wriggling little animals, ran.

“No!” said Hope. “Spread out! Back wall—some of you, back against that wall—some of you over there.…There’s a vibration in the earth—tree roots are moving.…”

“Spread the weight!” said Urchin, who had realized what Hope was trying to do. He ran to organize the puzzled animals. “You, you, you, up against this wall. Stand absolutely still. Needle, take this lot outside.…”

“Downhill, not up!” shouted Hope.

“You three, stay here with Mother Huggen,” called Urchin—then he, too, heard what Hope had heard. From somewhere a little farther uphill came a coarse trickling as if someone were pouring sand or grit, and all the time it became louder.

Something creaked. There was a cracking and a tearing as if a tree were being torn up by the roots, then a roar—Needle covered Myrtle’s ears—a rumble, and a crash that made the earth shake. Everyone flinched. Urchin bent to shield the young squirrels in his arms. A thin rain of earth and sand landed on every head.

“Hope?” said Urchin. He didn’t dare move, even to look up.

“Keep still,” said Hope softly.

Urchin stood absolutely still, holding the baby squirrels firmly in his arms, praying that they wouldn’t wriggle or kick. In the intent silence he could hear every trickle of sand. He heard the breathing of the squirrels in his arms. A crash above him made him duck and squeeze his eyes shut—his hold on the babies tightened. One of them squeaked.

“Sorry,” whispered Urchin.

All became quiet. He opened his eyes. Apart from more sand and earth on the floor, nothing had changed. When Hope said, “It’s stopped now,” he found he had been holding his breath.

“Don’t anyone move yet,” Urchin ordered. “Except you, of course, Hope. You should give the orders now.”

“Then I’d better just make sure it’s safe, sir,” he said. “Moth, will you come, too, please?”

Hope and Moth scurried about, listening, and scenting the earth. Then they had a whispered conversation, nodded, ran out of the burrow, and finally came back to Urchin.

“It’s all safe,” said Hope. Moth brushed herself down, took the squirrels out of Urchin’s arms, and held on firmly to the one who tried to get away.

“Well done, everyone!” said Urchin.

“And enough excitement for one afternoon!” said Mother Huggen.

“A huge elm tree’s fallen down!” said Moth. “It must have been directly over the cave Hope found.”

“Storm must have felled it,” said Mother Huggen.

“It wasn’t just the storm,” said Moth. “Its roots had been damaged and loosened from underneath, just as if somebody had been scrabbling at it. It couldn’t hold. All the roots on one side came down and it keeled over.”

“It took a lot of earth and stone with it,” said Hope. “Some of it fell underneath and some rolled down the hill.”

Myrtle’s face creased as if she were about to cry. “Were Furtle and Ouch down there?” she asked, and fell weeping into Mother Huggen’s arms.

“Oh, Myrtle!” said Needle, stroking the spines on Myrtle’s head. “They’re probably all right!”

“We’re not certain that they were in there, Myrtle,” said Urchin. “And if they were, they might be safe. As soon as the earth’s had time to settle, we’ll investigate.”

“We can do it now,” said Hope. “There’s no more loose earth. And I think we can get in sideways now—only, I don’t mean the sideways sort of

sideways, I mean we can go in through the side of the hill, where the roots came away."

It took a bit of scrabbling and scrambling, but soon Urchin dropped down into the chamber where Furtle and Ouch had slept the night before. Hope and Needle climbed in after him, and helped Myrtle down. Finding their moss bed, she curled up on it tightly with her paw in her mouth.

"Found anything?" called Crispin's voice above them.

"Your Majesty!" said Urchin. As the king and Prince Oakleaf appeared, bending down to look through a gap in the tree roots, Urchin, Needle, and Hope all bowed. Myrtle copied them, drying her eyes.

Crispin and Oakleaf twisted through the tree roots and leaped down to land beside Urchin. It seemed to Urchin that there was a grimace of pain across Crispin's face as he landed, but it was gone so quickly that Urchin couldn't be sure if he'd seen it at all.

"Oakleaf and I were doing a patrol of the island; then Oakleaf meant to join you," said Crispin. "Then we saw the tree fall." Sitting down, he lifted Myrtle onto his lap. "Tears, Myrtle?"

"My br…bro…brother and…and…and sister were in here!" she sobbed into his shoulder. Hope stopped sniffing the ground and nodded in Crispin's direction.

"Well, they're not here now," said the king, smoothing her spines. He looked over her head at Needle and Urchin. "There's no sign of them, is there?"

"They might…have…have…been…cr…crushed!" wailed Myrtle.

"I don't think so," said Crispin. "Let's see if we can find anything, shall we?"

"There were hedgehogs in here last night, Your Majesty," said Hope. "Young ones. But I don't think anyone got hurt."

Urchin and Needle were already searching. It was reassuring to find no sign of injury. But they did find small, twisting tunnels.

"They're all very narrow," observed Urchin, who had to lie on the floor to take a good look.

Crispin drew his sword and prodded it through one tunnel after another. "Blocked by the fall," he said quietly. "We need to get them dug

out, but without doing any more damage. Oakleaf, find some good moles. Hope, have a listen, will you? Myrtle, will you go to Needle now?"

He left Myrtle in Needle's care and sat down beside Urchin, lowering his voice. "The tides haven't finished with us yet," he said. "There's more flooding and wild weather to come. The old animals—Apple and Tay, that generation—are saying they've never known anything like it."

"We'll survive somehow, sir," said Urchin.

"That's not all," continued Crispin. "Mossberry's followers—the ones who survived—are convinced that he prophesied all this, which really doesn't help at all. It's enough coping with a wrecked island, without a mad squirrel spreading stories of doom and destruction."

Urchin couldn't think of anything to say, so he said nothing.

"And the really annoying thing," continued Crispin, "is that we can't begin to rebuild our homes and repair the damage until after the next wave. All we can do is be strong, look confident, and keep everyone feeling like Mistmantle islanders, even if Mistmantle Island is crumbling around them."

"I'll do my best, sir," said Urchin. A movement caught his eye. "What's Myrtle doing?"

As they stopped talking and leaned forward, Needle put a clawtip to her lips. Myrtle had stopped crying. With a faraway look on her face she had taken a pawful of moss and was pressing, turning, and shaping it.

The sandy burrow where Furtle and Ouch had sheltered had become drafty in the night, which was probably why they had woken unusually early. Ouch had squeezed his eyes shut and curled up, ready to go back to sleep. A light dusting of sand and earth from the tree root had fallen on Furtle's upturned face, making her sit up and scowl.

"It's raining," she said. "Only it's sand. It's sanding. And it's cold."

The next shower of earth brought down a few earthworms and beetles. Furtle watched, wide-eyed, as they fell about her.

"Breakfast!" she said. "It's raining breakfast!"

Ouch forgot that he didn’t want to get up, and did get up. Earth spilled over them as they ate.

“I like the breakfast,” said Ouch, looking up.

“Apart from the breakfast, it’s not very nice in here anymore,” said Furtle. “It’s leaky. Eat up all your nice earwigs, and then we’ll go.”

By this time she had no idea which way led back to Mother Huggen and the big chamber, but she had forgotten all about Mother Huggen’s orders. She and Ouch were on a big adventure, and nothing else mattered. Ouch always followed her without question. So she found the way out of the cave that looked most interesting—the lowest, tiniest, and twistiest—and followed it.

“What are you making, Myrtle?” asked Needle after a while.

Myrtle looked at the moss and frowned. “It isn’t anything yet,” she said, and went on playing with the moss, singing softly to herself and swaying. Finally, as they watched, she made an archway, and began to shape something that might be a flower.

“An archway means a home,” said Needle. “Do you think they’ve tried to go home?”

Myrtle didn’t answer. She went on playing with the moss and singing until she had made a flower, and placed it on the center of the archway.

“Can you tell me anything about that flower, Myrtle?” asked Needle.

“It’s hard to get it right with moss,” said Myrtle. “I wish I had the paints and things. It should be yellow.”

“A yellow flower?” suggested Needle. “Marigold for joy? A joyful home?”

“No, it’s the wrong shape,” said Urchin. “Could it be a spring flower? A home for springtime?”

“It’s a kingcup!” exclaimed King Crispin. “Is that right, Myrtle?”

Myrtle looked at the flower with her head on one side, as if she couldn’t be quite sure what it was, but if she listened patiently it might tell her. Then she said, “Yes. Yes, please, Your Majesty, it’s a kingcup.”

“Good girl,” said Crispin.

“Kingcup for royalty!” said Urchin. “So we’re looking for a royal home?”

“The tower?” Needle suggested. “Could they be in the tower?”

“It’s well guarded,” said Crispin. “There may be a way of tunneling through, but those two little ones couldn’t do it.”

“Or the old Mole Palace?” said Urchin. “We’ve cleared everyone out of it, but they might have gone back.”

“Could well be,” said Crispin. “We need light animals who can check in there without starting any landslides. Oakleaf, you go, and take Tipp and Todd with you. Urchin, try the tower. Fingal and Swanfeather can check the underground lake in case they’re on the way to the tower by water. Needle, don’t let Myrtle out of your sight.”

Ouch didn’t know how far he’d walked, but it felt like too far—certainly too far without anything to drink.

“My paws are tired,” he said. “All four of them.”

“Not far to go now,” said Furtle, who knew that if she kept on long enough they would be in one of two places. They would either be back where they had started, or they would be Somewhere Else. She had expected that, sooner or later, they would have met some other animals in these tunnels, and was a tiny bit worried that nobody was about, but she wouldn’t tell Ouch.

“More stairs!” sighed Ouch. Even his nose felt tired. But the only way to go was up, so they went on, stair upon stair, scrabbling away at moss and fallen earth. Some of the steps were overgrown with moss, and here and there they had to weave their way in and out of tree roots, but they came out at last to an arched doorway. The wooden door looked locked, but when they tried it, it creaked and opened.

“Here we are!” cried Furtle, as if she had been meaning to get here all along, though in fact she had never known it existed. “This is our little house!”

Ouch forgot his weariness at once.

“It can be our palace!” he exclaimed.

It was strangely like a palace, though moss and tree roots grew thickly everywhere and made it dark. Ouch ran about, stretching up to put his paws on windowsills where ivy trailed. Furtle ran through the chamber to find an adjoining room from which she could hear running water. Opening another door, she found a spring.

“It’s perfect!” she cried. “You’re right, Ouch, it’s a palace!”

When they had pulled out the moss that blocked the windows, they found they were left with heaps of beautiful soft bedding, a generous supply of beetles, and a spectacular view of the sea far below them. The chamber was rounded, with windows on all sides to let in as much light as possible, and, after running from one to another to look down, they hugged each other in delight. They could not have imagined anything so perfect, and in finding it, they forgot everything else.

Ruffle the hedgehog was running away from the tower as Urchin reached it. He had heard Mossberry shouting before he got there, and, looking up, saw a clenched paw at a barred window. A guard nodded a greeting as Urchin ran past, skimmed up, and jumped through a window.

“Afternoon, Urchin,” said Todd the mole, who was in the corridor. “Mossberry’s noisy today. Been at it for hours. With any luck, he’ll have shouted himself hoarse soon.”

“Freedom!” shouted Mossberry.

“We had to fit bars on that window specially for him,” said Todd, and added quietly, “Forty-eight. You’d think he’d be grateful. He complained because we took his chair away.”

“Why did you do that?” asked Urchin.

“Because he’d already smashed it into matchwood and thrown it at the guard who brought his dinner,” said Todd. “How’s it going?”

“The king wants you and Tipp to go to the Mole Palace,” said Urchin. “We’re still looking for those little hedgehogs, Furtle and Ouch, and they

could be in there. Prince Oakleaf's going, too."

"Delighted!" said Todd. "Captain Padra's about to take over here. I'll be glad to get away from the Calamity King there."

"Calamity!" cried Mossberry from the cell.

"Told you," said Todd. "That's another four points, and right at the end of my watch! Fifty-two."

"Points?" asked Urchin.

"It's a game, sir," said Todd. "It whiles away the time up here. Two points for 'freedom,' four for 'calamity,' and six for 'death to all tyrants.' He says some other things, too, but they're a bit on the offensive side and it doesn't seem right to win points for them. That means—oh!" He stood to attention. "Here's Captain Padra. Mossberry's in good voice, sir."

"Plague and fire, is he still at it?" said Padra. "Hello, Urchin."

"Hear me!" yelled Mossberry.

"Fifty-two points, sir," said Todd. "And I don't know if he's eaten anything today. Certainly not his breakfast, because he threw that at me."

"Freedom!" screamed Mossberry.

"Fifty-four," said Todd. "Have you seen my brother, sir? The king wants us."

"He was with Brother Juniper," said Padra. "Oh, be quiet, Mossberry. How can an animal think straight with that going on?" He lowered his voice. "With any luck he'll fall asleep soon. The odd thing is that we still get a few devoted animals coming here to see him, and they'd risk their lives to get him out. Plaguing—royalty and present company excepted—but, plaguing squirrels! I'll take over now, Todd."

"Thank you, sir," said Tod. "Fifty-four to beat, sir," he added as he marched away down the corridor.

"Death to—" began Mossberry.

"Six," muttered Padra. "It's going to be a long watch."

Hunger is good, thought Mossberry. He ate only crumbs now, despising the food the tower animals brought him. *Unclean. The tower is unclean.* He dragged his claws down the stone walls and clutched at the bars. It all depended on him. Only he could lead his followers through the mists. The island of Mistmantle was to be destroyed, and all who did not follow him would perish with it. In spite of the flood, he was still here. There would be more storms and floods—even the defiled animals here in the tower knew that.

There was no way of saving Mistmantle. The Heart would crush it. All he could do was to save his followers, and, of course, himself.

Hunger sharpened him. Dreams and voices swam in and out of his head, waking and sleeping. Which was which? Anger and frustration overwhelmed him and he hurled himself screaming from the window to the door.

"Destroy!" he yelled, again and again. "Destroy, destroy, destroy!" Hysteria carried him. "King, captain, false priest in your filthy evil tower, you will be destroyed!"

Outside the cell, Padra beckoned Scufflen the hedgehog page. "My respects to the queen," he said, "and please, could she send something to calm him down? Chamomile or something, but she'll know what's best. We have to feel sorry for him, Scufflen. I only have to stand here while it's my watch, and then I'll walk away. He can't walk away from himself."

Exhausted, Mossberry collapsed on the floor and laughed helplessly at the ceiling. "Destroy, destroyer, destroyer, destroyer," he muttered. Lights and colors flashed in his head. It was as if he heard his own name.

Mossberry, destroyer! Mossberry, destroyer!

He sat up, still laughing. It seemed so clear now. To create something was easy. Any fool could make a song, embroider a Threading, or build a home. He had never had time for such trivial things himself. This was the greatest work of all—destruction! This was his destiny! He was the chosen one! He had been wrong to think that the Heart would destroy Mistmantle! The Heart had sent him to do that!

That was his destiny! Mossberry, the destroyer of Mistmantle! And he must start with the tower!

When Tipp the mole had left the priest's turret, Juniper and Tide knelt down to pray. Through the open windows they could hear the sea, swish and fall, swish and fall, steady and reassuring. Juniper imagined Sepia adrift on that sea, and the sea was ruthless. Was she alive, or was she dead? He felt that she was still alive, that her spirit still held strong. He took a deep breath, and felt a tingle in his paws.

"Brother Juniper," said Tide, "are you all right?"

Juniper did not appear to hear, or even to see him. He had become completely still. Then turning his paws palm upward, he spoke.

One must come and one must go,
One must go and one will come,
There must be sorrow before joy.

Tide waited to hear if there would be any more. Most prophecies were longer than this, and more complicated. This one was very simple and Tide repeated it—but he had no idea what it could mean.

CHAPTER NINE

ORR TASTED THE AIR AND ROWED HARDER. He needed to catch sight of the mists again and stay on the outside edge of them. There were disturbances in the air and on the tide, and he would need to place himself in the shelter of the mists. Whatever had caused the rage tide, it had not settled. He had heard stories of the Ashfire, the fire island where Queen Cedar had lived as a little child, where the fire mountain had suddenly erupted, not into flame, but into rivers of molten fire that had poured down and spread hot ashes over the earth. It must take a long time for anything so powerful and so destroying to settle down. It seemed to him that the sea had exploded, too, in the rage tide, and it would not settle down again easily. He rowed on, past the mists, sleeping in snatches by day. At night he wrapped himself in the warm yellow-gold cloak, watched the stars, and steered south.

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A message was carried across the island, summoning the senior animals to the Gathering Chamber. The animals arriving were nodded through by the guards, who recognized them all. Ruffle the hedgehog tried to slip in among them and was stopped.

“I’m Urchin’s new helper, sir,” she said, “since Corr went away, sir.”

“No, you’re not,” said the guard. “You’re that hedgehog who’s been trying to see Mossberry. Off you go, now.”

Ruffle made several more attempts to get into the tower, but discovered it was useless. Or, at least, it was today. She’d try again.

Urchin ran up a wall and dropped through a window. He met Padra and Arran in a corridor.

“It’s quieter today,” remarked Padra. “Mossberry must have shouted himself hoarse, Heart be thanked. I got eighty-two points yesterday.”

“He must sleep sometimes, surely,” said Arran, and Urchin asked her how her shoulder was.

“A bit stiff,” she said, but he guessed that it was worse than she admitted.

“There’s Juniper!” said Urchin, and ran ahead to meet him. They had both been so busy in different parts of the island that they’d hardly seen each other since the rage tide. But there was no time to catch up with news or ask questions when the king had called them to the Gathering Chamber. Queen Cedar arrived, her fur smelling faintly of flowers as it often did when she had been making medicines.

“Lavender, Your Majesty?” said Needle, coming down the stairs.

“Lavender and pennyjohn,” said the queen. “I’ll need rosemary, too. Mossberry’s mind is terribly disordered. He really does believe the things he says about himself. I’ve made a distillation to calm him down and help him think clearly, but they’ll take some time to have any effect. A combination of prayer, wise friendship, and the right medicines can be very effective in some cases, but this is Mossberry. As to prayer, he thinks he’s the only animal on the island in touch with the Heart. The only friends he wants are the ones who think he’s some sort of chosen one. There are limits to what I can do.”

“It’ll help if you can just keep him quiet, madam,” said Padra softly as they took their places. “He makes up new curses every day.”

Without the Threadings, the Gathering Chamber walls were wide and empty, but the curtains were still there, drawn back from the long, wide windows. Apart from that, the chamber was filled with stacked-up boxes and odds and ends of furniture, moved there from the lower floors to protect them from flood damage. Fingal slipped in at the last minute, and Crispin stood up.

“The queen and I greet you all,” he said. “May the Heart keep us and bring us through these dark times. Welcome, each one of you—Captain Padra, Captain Docken, Captain Arran, Hope, Tide, and Fingal of the Floods. Welcome, Moth of the Circle, Spade of the Circle, and you squirrels—Whittle, Brother Juniper of the Journeyings, Urchin of the Riding Stars, Catkin, and Oakleaf. Firstly, I need to ask Brother Juniper and the otters what movement they detect in the winds and tides.”

“A sight too much of it, Your Majesty,” said Fingal.

“There will be a second surge and a storm, but not yet,” said Padra. “We just have to wait it out. I know everyone wants to get their lives back in order and rebuild their homes, but the low-lying parts of the island will only flood again. And the seabed is still settling, so we can’t tell which direction it’s going to come from.”

“And the other storms haven’t finished, either,” said Juniper. “I mean, the ones we can’t see. Something else is going to happen, some wild disturbance from within the island. Don’t panic. It will pass. All this will be over and we shall have peace, peace of wind and waves and hearts and minds, but I don’t know how or when. In the meantime, as Captain Padra said, we just have to do the best we can.”

“Have there been any more casualties?” asked Crispin.

“No, Your Majesty, and the healers are taking excellent care of those who were injured when the first wave struck,” said Padra.

“And we have no more news of the missing animals,” said the king. “Furtle and Ouch, who are on the island, and Sepia, who is not.”

Juniper glanced at Urchin, but Urchin had lowered his eyes and did not respond. “I have knelt before the Heart for Sepia,” said Juniper, “and I still can’t be sure of anything, but I believe she’s alive. If she were dead she’d be at peace, but she isn’t.”

Urchin looked up sharply. “Not at peace?” he repeated.

“It’s hard to explain,” said Juniper, “but I feel a tugging, a calling, as if she’s in distress—and if she’s in distress she must be alive.”

“Is she hurt?” demanded Urchin.

Juniper wished he had something more helpful to say. Urchin’s pain was his pain, too.

“I only know she’s unhappy,” he said.

“If you feel she’s calling out, have you any idea at all where she’s calling from?” persisted Urchin. Day and night, he had hoped and prayed for some message from Corr. Knowing nothing was almost unbearable. “At least, do you know if she’s on the land or at sea?”

“No idea,” said Juniper. “I’m so sorry, I wish I did know. But here’s some hope! A prophecy!”

All eyes turned to him. They waited.

“I don’t understand it,” he admitted. “I don’t even know if it’s anything to do with Sepia. But it’s this—

One must come and one will go,
One must go and one will come,
There must be sorrow before joy.”

“Repeat it, all of you,” ordered Crispin. When they all knew it by heart, he said, “We don’t understand it yet, but we must remember it. I will hold it in my heart before the Heart, and ask you all to do the same. Now, are we any nearer to finding Furtle and Ouch? Oakleaf, I understand you have no good news about the Mole Palace?”

“We didn’t find the hedgehogs there, sir,” said the prince. “We searched every corner and every tunnel. Fingal and Swanfeather even came in and swam through the flooded ones. Tipp and Todd were going to have one last good hunt, but Hope says there’s no scent.”

“Let’s get back to what we know,” said Crispin. “They’re very young, so they can’t have gone far from where they started. They’re either somewhere central, or in the inlets and bays where the island is narrow. Needle, has Myrtle given any more clues?”

“She just keeps drawing an arch and a kingcup,” said Needle. “Yes, definitely a kingcup. A royal dwelling. There aren’t many of those.”

“She’s beyond me,” said the king. “Whittle, you’re the historian. Do you know of any royal dwellings? Abandoned ones? Ancient ones? Anything?”

Whittle became very quiet. Urchin could see that he was thinking his way around the island, and, having done that, thinking his way steadily through the histories. Finally, he said, “Your Majesty, there’s—well, maybe there isn’t. It’s too—well—it’s only a story.”

“Animals used to think that the Mole Palace was just a story,” said the king. “What have you got for us, Whittle?”

“Tay told me something once,” he said. “The story is that King Acorn had a playhouse cut out of a cliff for his children where their attendants could take them in summer. It was used year after year, but then the cliffs nearby started to erode and the king decided it wasn’t safe anymore, so it was abandoned. Mistress Tay thought it was just a story, because if it had really existed there’d still be some trace of it, and there’s nothing on the Threadings about it.”

“Of course there isn’t!” said Needle. “It was a children’s play castle. Why would that be on the Threadings?”

“Yes, and it could have become overgrown,” said King Crispin, “if it were on a cliff inland, or on the coast. Whittle?”

“When Tay told me, I imagined it looking over the sea,” said Whittle. “But I can’t remember if Tay said that, or if that’s how I imagined it. We could ask her.”

“How is she?” asked Arran.

“She gets tired a lot,” said Whittle, “and that makes her grumpy. I mean, grumpier than ever, if you’ll pardon me for saying so. And she’s very deaf when she wants to be. She remembers a lot from the past, but only if she’s in a good mood.”

“Beg your pardon, Your Majesty,” said Spade, “but if you were putting up a summer house for the young’uns, where would you put it?”

“Good thinking, Spade!” said Crispin. “I’d build it near the tower so they weren’t too far from home. And somewhere sunny.”

“South side, then,” said Padra.

“And, excuse me,” said Princess Catkin, “but if it were my summer palace I’d want it on the east, where all those inlets are.”

“I used to imagine a place just like that!” said Oakleaf. “Right on the tip of the island, beside Sword Point—you know, at the top of the deep inlet. I used to think I’d love a summer palace there!”

“You should have said,” said Crispin. “I would have built—just a moment—no, I wouldn’t. The cliff’s been badly eroded there. Any animal falling out of a window would be straight in the sea.”

“There probably isn’t anything there,” said Prince Oakleaf, who didn’t want them to waste time looking for Furtle and Ouch in the wrong place.

“It’s just that I imagined a palace there, when I was little.”

“Exactly!” said Juniper. “Very few thoughts are completely new. If you thought it would be a good place for a palace, it’s almost certain that somebody else had thought of it before. If it was where you suggest, it may have been abandoned because the cliff eroded, exactly as Tay said.”

“Then the summer palace may have eroded, too,” said Crispin, “but we should look for it, all the same. Urchin, Spade, and Needle, you go. Take Hope, Tipp, Todd, and Myrtle. And you, too, Moth. They might need a healer.”

There was a knock at the door. Crispin nodded to Docken, who opened it. A squirrel page called Grain stood outside, looking unsure as to whether he should speak at all in front of this company.

“Here’s Grain,” said the king. “He’s been part of Mossberry’s guard today. How’s he doing, Grain?”

Grain bowed, looking nervous. “Your Majesty, he threw his medicine out of the window,” he said.

“Disgusting little article!” muttered Docken.

“Anything else?” asked Crispin.

“He said a terrible judgment is coming.…”

“On the island, he always says that,” said the king. “So apart from that, he’s being reasonable, is he?”

Grain looked at the ground. He clearly wasn’t enjoying this.

“Spit it out, Grain,” said Fingal.

“He said he wanted to fight and kill you in single combat, Your Majesty,” said Grain almost apologetically.

“He’d be making a big mistake,” Padra said to Grain. “I wouldn’t take Crispin on. Best sword squirrel in the island.”

“It’s beneath your dignity to fight him, Your Majesty,” said Fingal. “But not beneath mine, because I haven’t got any. I’ll fight him if you like.”

Crispin smiled. “Thank you, Fingal,” he said, “but nobody is going to fight him. He can stay put and take his medicine. Off you go, Urchin and the search party. You’ll need tools for digging. And, Spade, tell those moles to feel for every vibration. The island seems to be falling down around us just now. Thank you, Grain, you may go.”

There was a scream of rage from Mossberry's cell.

"Sounded like a six to me," said Padra. "Add it to your score, Grain."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," said Grain, and bowed his way out of the room. Presently the meeting broke up, and only the king and queen, Padra, and Arran remained.

"How is that shoulder really, Arran?" asked the queen.

"It'll do," said Arran.

"It's worse than you're telling us," said Crispin. "All of us here know that."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty," said Arran, "but your old wound from the Raven War is worse than you're telling us. You don't make a fuss, and neither will I."

"I can't do a thing about the king's injury," said Queen Cedar, "but maybe I can about yours." But when she had pressed Arran's shoulder at different points, and asked her to clench her paws and raise and lower her arm, she finally said, "I can ease the pain and stiffness, but it'll never be the same again. You'll always have problems with it."

"That's what I thought," said Arran. "It really is time to hang up my circlet, Crispin."

"Your circlet is yours until the day you die," said Crispin. "But I know you want to be relieved of your duties as captain."

"I'll stay until the worst is over," she said. "Then I'll help Fionn with her refuge for lost frogs, or whatever she thinks she's doing. She seems to be adopting them."

"I couldn't ask for more," said Crispin.

Later that day, two hedgehog guards took salad and cordial to Mossberry's prison cell, set it down on the table, and waited to see if he would eat it, or throw it on the floor. He must have been hungry, because he ate.

"Do you see how the Heart provides for me?" he said. "The Heart sends me all I need!"

“The queen sends you all you need,” said a hedgehog.

“The queen sent it?” repeated Mossberry.

He sipped at the cordial and, when they had gone, threw it out of the window. Typical trick, he thought. It’s some foul potion that the so-called queen has sent me. She’s trying to keep me quiet because she is evil and I have found her out. The Heart is against her. Her evil tower will fall about her in flames. He imagined the queen trapped in the tower with fire roaring all around her. The thought of fire excited him, so that he wrenched and heaved at the window bars in frustration and, at last, curled up on the floor and rocked, feeding his imagination with thoughts of fire.

After nights of navigating by the stars and sleeping little, Corr saw land. The sight lifted his heart with joy, and he found new energy to go on rowing. His muscles had grown strong and hard in his journey.

He had heard about Swan Isle—Urchin had told him about it—but this didn’t look quite like the island Urchin had described. Maybe he was approaching from a different direction, but, as he turned the boat and drew nearer, it seemed too bleak and bare to be the home of swans. As the boat ran aground he leaned over the oars to scan the shoreline.

Something moved. Something on the ground uncurled itself and raised a small, searching head that turned to and fro. Then another. A hiss, and a slither—

Snakes! He swung the boat around and rowed furiously, putting clear water between himself and the snakes. When the first anger and disappointment wore off, he remembered something else Urchin had said: Crispin, when he went to Swan Isle, had landed first on a snake-infested island. At least this proved that he was in the right area. Crispin had reached Swan Isle, and so would he. He tasted the air again, leaned over to trail a paw in the water, then rowed on. When he had drifted into sleep, light rain woke him, and he sat up, rubbing his aching shoulders.

A wreckage of leaves, twigs, and blossom floated on the sea around him. Before him was a windswept island of bent and broken trees, where a silver stream curled its way to the shore.

“Heart help me,” said Corr. “It has to be Swan Isle.” The position of the spring and the shape of the bay were exactly as Urchin had told him, but from the look of the trees and the scattered foliage on the water, the rage tide must have hit this island savagely. At least, this time, he couldn’t see any snakes.

He rowed to the shore and slipped into the sea, rolling for joy in the shallow waves, feeling the salt water on his fur. Then he heaved the boat on to dry ground, tied the rope to a tree, and plodded stiffly uphill. Once he caught sight of a squirrel, but when he called to it the squirrel only shrieked, put a paw to its mouth, and ran away; so Corr climbed on uphill, stepping over fallen branches, until he came to a lake.

Three or four swans floated there, bending their necks to feed. Leaves and twigs drifted on the water and clung to their disheveled feathers. Around the shore, parents guarded their nests.

He was about to call out a greeting when a flapping of great white wings in his face terrified him. He sprang back, holding out his paws to show he was unarmed as two swans flew at him.

“I’m harmless!” he cried. “I won’t hurt anyone! I came to find Prince Crown—I’m an otter of Mistmantle!”

The two swans still bent over him with fierce, strong beaks, but they did not attack him. Even with tired eyes and ruffled feathers, they were daunting.

“Mistmantle?” asked one. “Are you a friend of King Crispin?”

“Yes!” he said.

“And of Urchin of the Riding Stars, the friend of swans?”

“Yes, I serve Urchin,” he said.

“Did you fight the ravens?”

“Yes!”

“Then you may meet Lord Crown,” said the first swan. “You called him Prince Crown. He is Lord Crown now.”

As they spoke, something swished behind them. Corr looked past them to see a swan with a ring of gold feathers around his head settle onto the water.

“Pri…Lord Crown!” said Corr.

“An otter!” said the new swan gladly, as the others curved their necks to bow to him. “A Mistmantle otter! You are most welcome! Our hospitality may be poor at this time, but it is good to see a Mistmantle animal!”

Corr could tell that the welcome was warm and genuine. But he saw, too, that Crown was exhausted, and trying, not quite successfully, to hide it.

“Prince—Lord Crown,” he said, and bowed. “I’m Corr, Urchin’s page.”

“Yes, I’m Lord Crown now,” said Crown gravely. “My father, Lord Arcneck, died in the rage tide.” He inclined his head toward the other two swans to dismiss them. “Did it strike Mistmantle, too?”

“Yes, sir,” said Corr, but even Mistmantle hadn’t looked as devastated as this. “I’m sorry to hear of your father.”

“Come to the shore,” said Crown. “The water there will suit you better.”

Corr followed him uneasily, beginning to wish he hadn’t come. It had seemed sensible to look for Sepia on Swan Isle, but now, seeing its devastation, he felt he was intruding on their tragedy. Swan Isle had enough troubles of its own. He slipped into the littered sea, and Crown glided beside him.

“So,” said Crown, “what has the rage tide done to Mistmantle?”

“It’s swamped crops, trees, homes—anything in its way,” said Corr. “The king and the Circle managed to keep most of the animals safe. It must have been far worse here. But, please, Lord Crown, I have an errand. Do you remember Sepia from our island? Sepia of the Songs?”

“Sepia,” repeated Crown thoughtfully. “I remember her voice. I saw her leading the little singers.” He tilted his head, and to Corr he looked far older and sadder than he should. “What happened? Did the rage tide take her?”

Corr hesitated. “Yes,” he said. “At least, it swept her away, but she might still be alive. That’s why I came. She was swept out to sea and through the mists, clinging to a boat, and nobody could reach her. I had hoped she might be here, but…”

“For everyone’s sake, I wish she were,” said Lord Crown. “But if she were on this island, I would have known.”

So that was that. Corr tried to think of something to say, but there was nothing. If Sepia had not arrived on Swan Isle, he had no idea where else to look. It was as if she had sailed out of sight forever.

“Believe me,” continued Crown, “if she had landed here, she would be cared for as an honored guest. But what about you—you have left Mistmantle by water to find her! You must have left Mistmantle forever for this quest!”

“I’m a Voyager, sir,” he said. “I can come and go freely through the mists. If I can find her, I can get her to them.”

“And then?”

Corr wished even more that he hadn’t come. He had meant to ask if a swan could carry her over the mists for him. It had seemed so simple when he had first worked it all out, but these swans had suffered so terribly in the rage tide that he couldn’t possibly ask for their help. Perhaps Whitewings could provide a swan. The thought of rowing all the way back there, then to Mistmantle, seemed to knock the strength out of him.

“I understand,” said Crown. “You hoped that one of us could take her home. Mistmantle and Swan Isle have helped each other ever since Crispin landed here in exile, and I know how your island suffered in the Raven Wars. Rest here, Corr. Fish. Drink from our streams. Be refreshed. Hold on to your hopes. Let me talk to my swans.”

Corr slept in his boat that night, warm under the yellow cloak. Sometimes he woke thinking he was out at sea and needed to look up to read the stars—then he would remember where he was, and drift into sleep again. The sun had risen when the prodding of a strong beak dragged him reluctantly awake.

“Corr!” Lord Crown was nudging him, shaking the cloak from him. Corr uncurled and rubbed his eyes, hoped he was being awoken for a good reason.

“I have news for you, Corr,” said Crown.

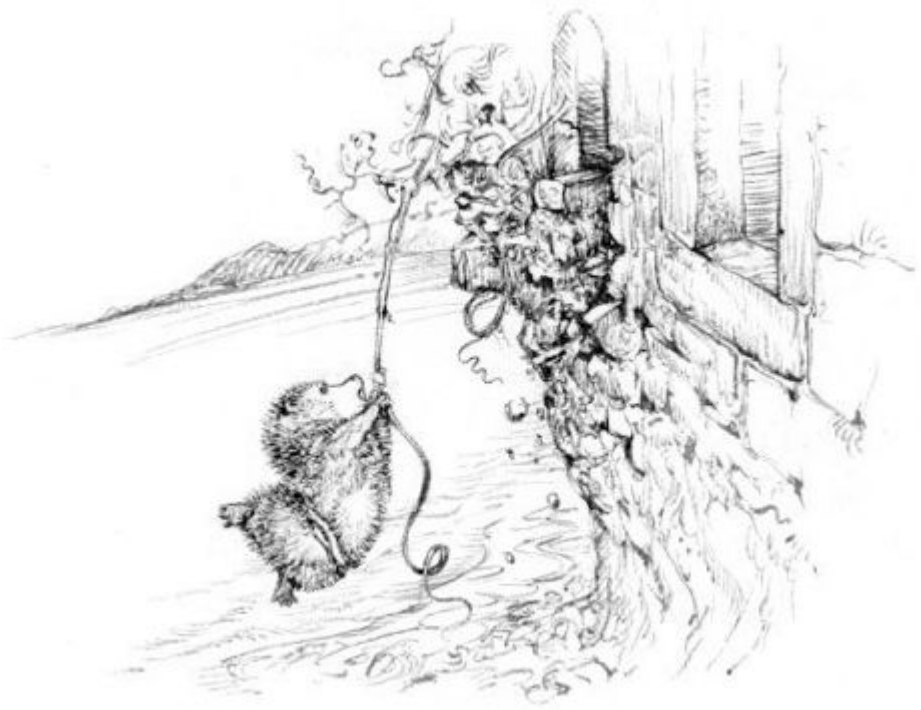
Corr sat up. Lord Crown stretched his wings, standing on the prow of the boat.

“I have spoken to my swans,” he said. “One, who has returned from a long flight, reports seeing a boat—an animal appeared to be sleeping in it.”

“That could have been me,” said Corr, trying not to yawn.

“No—not in those waters,” said Crown. “And I have talked to our squirrels. If she’s alive, I know where she may be.”

The tiredness fell from Corr like an unclasped cloak. This time, this time, had he found her?



CHAPTER TEN

URTLE WAS PLAYING HOUSE. The little back room was her pantry. It was not a good time of year for berries, but earthworms, slugs, and beetles were plentiful, so they had eaten very well. She had not yet learned how to make nests properly, so she filled a corner of the room with moss and leaves, and they made themselves cozy in that. She had once been to the tower to see the room where her sister Myrtle made the Threadings, and had been most impressed when a tower squirrel had brought them cordial and berry cakes on a wooden tray. So now she was making trays out of any bits of bark she could find, and pretending the water was cordial. But there was no way of making an earwig look like a berry cake, especially when it ran away. Ouch was having the most wonderful time. He had made his own little den in a corner of the room, from which he could see both the windows and the doorway. This was important because, he said, they could be attacked by ravens. He had made a sword from a stick and had fought off dozens of imaginary ravens already. They had gathered at the windows and he had seen them all off and rescued his sister from two or three flying up the stairs. Sadly, that fight had been so fierce that his sword had broken when he swung it at a raven and it broke on the wall. It had been a really good sword, too. He was now making an even better one with a proper hilt, like the king's. He could make a sword belt, too, if he could find something to tie around his waist.

Climbing and trailing plants grew around the windows, and some of them had been growing for so long that they had embedded themselves into the crumbling stonework, and were growing through it. The creeper was strong, and would make a good sword belt. Ouch took a trailing stem of creeper and tugged until it came loose with a shower of dust and sand. He had bitten off a length of it and was dragging it across the floor when something fell with a bang.

It wasn't a very loud bang, and there was only one of it, so Ouch wasn't alarmed. He glanced up, couldn't see anything that had changed, and finished making his sword belt before trundling back to investigate.

There was a gap where there shouldn’t be. A stone from the window appeared to have dropped off, but it must have fallen into the sea because it wasn’t anywhere in the chamber. Ouch leaned over to look.

Suddenly, there was nothing beneath his paws. The falling stone had hit the window ledge on the way down, dislodging more of the old stonework. Too frightened to scream, he was falling.

With flailing paws he caught at the creeper, and his prickles held him there. Below him, the sea waited. Though he scarcely dared to move, he raised his head just enough to look up, and was dismayed to see how far away the window was. Determined not to look down, he tried to climb, but found he was too frozen with fear to move. All he could do, as the use of his voice came back to him, was to cry out for Furtle.

Furtle was pattering through from her pantry with a tray when she heard the urgent, frightened call. She dropped the tray and ran, looking all around her and calling for Ouch, until the cry came again.

“You’re outside!” she squealed, and dashed to the window.

Somehow, she managed to stop herself in time. For a moment she hovered on the edge of the broken sill, her paws tingling with fear—then she found her balance, stepped back, and lay down, reaching over the ledge with shaking paws.

“Ouch!” she cried. “I’m here! Take my paws!”

She looked down. The sea swirled toward her and she turned her face away. Just out of reach, hardly able to move a paw, Ouch curled his paws around the creeper.

“Take my paw,” she said again, but Ouch still clutched the creeper. “I can’t come and get you. You have to reach up to me.” Beneath her, she felt the stone crumbling. By clutching the creeper tightly with one paw and flexing the other, she found she could stop shaking. “One paw at a time, Ouch. Left forepaw first.”

Squeaking with fear, Ouch moved his left forepaw just enough to hold another tendril.

“Good little hedgehog,” said Furtle. “Now the other paw.”

Gradually, paw by paw, gaining a little confidence, Ouch climbed toward her. Furtle clung to the creeper with one paw and reached down with

the other, stretching as far as she could until his claws closed around her paw.

For one horrible second she was sure he'd tip her over the edge. Gripping his paw in both of hers, gritting her teeth, she heaved as Ouch scrabbled up to her and, at last, with the stone crumbling beneath him, fell into her arms. For a moment or two, he couldn't say a thing. Then he said, "That was exciting, wasn't it?" but not as if he meant it.

"It was horrid," she said, and they hugged each other while Ouch told her how he had come to fall out of the window in the first place. Without either of them saying so, they both knew that the adventure was over. It wasn't fun anymore.

"Where's Mummy?" asked Ouch.

"This way," said Furtle. She wasn't at all sure about where to find her parents, but she knew it was time to do so. They bundled up their cloaks and left the way they had come, Ouch wearing his belted sword. Behind them, another stone fell from the archway and tumbled into the sea.

Crown joined Corr at the water's edge at last. It had been a long, hard wait for Corr. Crown had been called away to the help of a squirrel whose home had been damaged by falling branches, and had only just come back, leaving Corr not knowing whether or not there was anything to hope for.

"I spoke to one of our swans who saw a small boat two days ago," said Crown. "It was far from here and heading west, so it couldn't have been you. An animal was rowing, but the swan was flying high and couldn't see what it was."

"So it could have been Sepia," said Corr. "What islands are there to the west?"

"Nothing close," replied Crown, "but have you ever heard of Ashfire?"

"I've heard of it," said Corr cautiously. "I don't know anything about it, except that our Queen Cedar was born there."

"Long ago, its mountain exploded into molten fire," said Crown. "Queen Cedar's family escaped to Whitewings, and some of our squirrels

are descendants of Ashfire families, too. Occasionally, swans fly over it."

"So you know where it is!" exclaimed Corr.

"Yes, but nobody lands on it now," said Crown. "The molten fire spread over it and left it barren. But if that was Sepia rowing west, why would she go that way? Why wouldn't she turn the boat back to Mistmantle?"

"She probably didn't know the way," said Corr. "I don't suppose she was ever taught to navigate, and by the time she'd been swept out to sea she would have lost all sense of direction. She may have been trying to find this island, and gone far off course."

"That could be it," said Crown. "And from what they told me, she could have reached Ashfire by now."

"But if it's a barren island she can't survive there!" exclaimed Corr.

"That makes it even more urgent," said Crown, stretching his wings. "We'll take fresh water and food. This island may be stricken, but the beechnuts are plentiful. We can take some of those."

"We?" repeated Corr.

"As you said," said Crown, "if you find her, you'll need a swan to fly her over the mists."

"But not you!" said Corr. "You have all the island to care for! Couldn't somebody else—one of your brothers or sisters?"

"Maybe," said Crown, "but there are two reasons for me to go. One is that all the swans have been battered in the rage tide, and I wouldn't ask this of any of them. And the second is that King Crispin has been the one I looked up to since I was very young, and he saved my life. I wouldn't desert Mistmantle now. Swan Isle and Mistmantle can still look after each other. Both our islands will need help after these tides and storms. And Mistmantle isn't only the home of King Crispin, it's the home of Urchin of the Riding Stars, who delivered the Whitewings swans from slavery. All swans honor him for that."

"I'm doing this for Urchin," said Corr. It was the best thing Crown could have heard from him, but he said it as if he were thinking aloud, or talking to himself. "I mean, I'm doing it for Sepia—we all love her, all the island. You couldn't not love Sepia. But I've served Urchin ever since I first went to court, and for his sake, I need to bring her back."

“Then,” said Lord Crown, “let me speak to my family. My mother will be regent while I’m away from home. For Urchin, for Sepia, for Crispin, for Mistmantle, I will come with you. Do you know about mendingmoss? Could you gather some?”

“I don’t think I’d recognize it, sir,” admitted Corr.

Lord Crown looked about, saw a squirrel in a tree, and called to her.

“Curltail!” he said. “Go to the princess’s grave. Fetch mendingmoss for me, all you can gather. Quickly, now—good girl!”

He flew away, in search of his family. Before Corr had filled the water bottles from the spring, the squirrel had returned with all the mendingmoss she could carry in her two forepaws. Awkwardly, with her paws full, she managed a sort of curtsy. Corr had never been bowed or curtsied to in his life and didn’t know what to do, so he gave a nod and a smile, as Urchin and the captains always did.

“It’s from the princess’s grave, sir, as Lord Crown said,” she told him. “All I could carry. The same as we used in the Raven War, and it saved the king of Mistmantle then.”

“It did,” he said, “and we need it to save a life now, if we reach her in time.” He sniffed the breeze, and was alarmed by the new, powerful current on the air. “We should go soon.”

“Have you ever…” she began shyly, and went on, “have you ever met Urchin of the Riding Stars?”

Corr smiled. “Yes. I know him well.” The squirrel’s eyes widened.

“What’s he like?” she asked.

“He’s my hero,” said Corr as Crown alighted beside them. “I polish his kit and make his bed and remind him to smooth his tail tip, and he’s still my hero. We should leave soon, Lord Crown. The second wave is coming.”

Crown raised his head. “Yes,” he said, “it’s on the air. Before the rage tide is through, the air will be wild!”

At first it was Urchin who led the search for the old summer palace, his squirrel instincts leading him toward the likeliest place for squirrel children

to have a playhouse. As they climbed higher up the cliffs, Hope and the moles spread out, each sniffing and listening in a different direction with Hope occasionally bumping into a rock or a tree root and apologizing to it. Needle followed with Myrtle, who was getting tired and dragging her paws.

“Can’t we have a rest?” she whined.

“If we do, you won’t want to get up again,” said Needle firmly. “If Furtle and Ouch are anywhere near, they’ll be so pleased to hear you.”

“Furtle! Ouch!” called Myrtle, and trudged on.

“Louder,” said Needle. But Myrtle’s loudest shout wasn’t a shout at all, and she struggled on, holding Needle’s paw.

“Shout with me, then,” said Needle. “After three. One—two—”

“Quiet!” shouted Todd. Myrtle squeaked and shrank against Needle.

“Have you found something?” asked Urchin.

“There’s something down there,” said Spade. “Tipp’s just been down and he reckons it’s been shaken about since last night. You can tell. Smells different. Todd, have a look in there, will you?”

Todd bolted down a mole hole and emerged shaking sand from his ears.

“Tight squeeze,” he said. “We’ll have to widen the tunnels. But there’s been some sort of a dwelling down here. Funny place to live. Where’s Hope?”

Hope, hearing his name, scrambled to the mole tunnel and, flattening his prickles, wriggled his head and shoulders into it. Urchin lay at the entrance, his ears pressed into the earth and moss, listening. Hope’s muffled voice reached him.

“They’ve been here,” he was saying. “There’s a nest, or it used to be—just a moment…Something sounds wobbly—”

“Get OUT!” shouted Spade. “Get back, spread out!”

Urchin seized Hope with both paws and heaved him out of the hole, getting badly scratched and prickled. For a few seconds, all three moles and Hope lay with their ears to the ground. Needle hugged Myrtle tightly.

Urchin strained his ears to hear. There was a soft pattering sound, as if pebbles were falling somewhere, then nothing. He was about to ask Hope what was happening, when he heard the hedgehog quietly counting.

“Eighteen—nineteen—twenty,” said Hope under his breath; then he and all the moles sat up and looked at each other.

“All clear,” said Spade, and added quietly, “Urchin, you’d better come down here.”

Urchin squeezed through the tunnel and dropped onto an earth floor. The moles followed.

“It could have lain uncovered for a thousand lifetimes,” said Tipp. “We must have walked over this ancient place, time and again.”

“Aye, took a bit of finding,” remarked Todd.

“This way, Urchin,” said Spade.

Urchin followed him to the arched chamber. Stones from the broken window lay where they had fallen. Remnants of a nest and a broken whittled stick lay on the floor. Hope sniffed at the nest, then turned and hurried away.

Urchin knelt by the pile of stones. “Tell me they’re not under that,” he said quietly.

“They’re not,” said Hope. “They’ve been here, but their scent goes this way, and it’s fresh. They went this way today.”

“Are you sure they were going away, not coming back?” said Urchin.

“I can’t make out paw prints,” said Hope.

He moved over to let Urchin through the tunnel. Urchin narrowed his eyes against the dark. Freshly fallen sand had confused the trail, but there was a faint impression of small paws, the claws pointing away from him.

“No other trails?” he asked.

“No, sir…I mean, no, Urchin,” said Hope.

“Then they left this way,” said Urchin. “Will the roof cave in any more?”

“With what this island’s going through just now?” said Spade. “Could do anything. Plagued if I know. But if that’s the way they went, that’s the way we’ll go. Mind, it’s a job for moles. And Hope, he’s as good as a mole. But them up there”—he jerked his head toward the place where Needle and Myrtle waited—“not them. No point in putting anyone else at risk. And it wouldn’t do for young Myrtle to see this mess.”

“Certainly not,” said Urchin. “And if I’m no use here, I’ll report back to the king.” He sprang into the tunnel, climbed out, and ran into Needle and Myrtle.

“They’ve been there,” he said, “and they’ve left.” He saw the disappointment on Myrtle’s face, and hugged her. “We’re getting close to them, Myrtle! Hope and the moles are on their trail.”

“Myrtle’s tired,” said Needle. “I’ll take her to her parents—they’re safely inland—and we can tell them we’re onto something, can’t we, Myrtle?”

“They seem to have been unharmed when they left here,” said Urchin. “You can tell them that much. I’m going to the king.”

“I can only take so much of this,” sighed Needle. “This is the second time we’ve almost found them, and nearly got ourselves killed in the process.”

“But they got out safely,” said Urchin. “Apple would say that the Heart protects the helpless.”

Needle couldn’t help thinking that Apple would say far too much, but she didn’t tell Urchin that. At the sound of falling pebbles she jumped to her paws, but it was only Hope slipping on some loose stones.

“Every time anything rattles, I jump,” she muttered. “I just wish the island would stop wriggling about and settle down. Come on, Myrtle, let’s get to somewhere nicer than this.”

Needle and Myrtle trotted away, paw in paw. Urchin paused several times on the way back to the tower. It was always worth one more look toward the mists, especially on a clear day like this one. He might see Corr the Voyager returning home; and even if there was no news of Sepia, at least he’d know that Corr was well. The most wonderful sight in the world, the sight he had longed for and dreamed of, would be—he treated himself to the thought of it—a swan flying over the mists, nearer and nearer, strong and graceful, and, on its back, a squirrel. And as she drew nearer he would see her face and she would wave her paw—

A paw touched his shoulder, and he jumped. The king! He bowed, feeling his skin burn with embarrassment. He wasn’t in the habit of daydreaming when there was work to do. But King Crispin only sat down and looked out to sea, so Urchin sat down beside him.

“I was coming to find you, sir,” said Urchin. “We’ve found the summer palace—Furtle and Ouch aren’t there, but Hope and the moles are on to a scent.”

“You don’t have to be a hero all the time,” said Crispin, looking out to the mists. “I’ve been doing what I do a lot these days—just going around the island, listening to the animals, hearing their stories, talking with them. It seems really important to do that now. I must go to that old play palace myself.”

“It’s badly decayed and unsafe, sir,” said Urchin.

“Then it’s a good thing I met you, or I might have fallen into it,” said Crispin. His voice softened. “Urchin, I know what you’re thinking. Do you think I never sat on a cliff and thought of Whisper? And, in a way, it’s harder for you. At least I knew Whisper was dead, but with Sepia…”

“As long as she isn’t found dead, there’s hope,” said Urchin. “But I almost think—please don’t misunderstand this—for her sake, I sometimes think I’d rather she *were* dead than bobbing about in the middle of the sea, starving, thirsty, cold, and alone, and after all that, dying anyway. I’d rather she just banged her head on the boat and drowned and didn’t know anything about it. I keep looking out to sea in case there’s any sign of Corr. It’s not just Sepia, it’s him. I’m supposed to be responsible for him. Padra must have felt like this when I had to go away.”

“But you came back, against all expectations,” said Crispin. “Corr made his own decision to go. A Voyager has to take responsibility for himself. He was bound to go beyond the mists soon.”

“She might have died within minutes of being swept away,” said Urchin. “As long as I don’t know, I can’t stop hoping.”

“The Heart never stops surprising us,” said Crispin. “I’m seeing Juniper and the captains in the Throne Room presently, and it would be good to have you with us.”

They scrambled to their paws. Urchin saw a flicker of pain cross Crispin’s face.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?” he asked.

“Cheek!” said Crispin. “Do you want to make a race of it? Down the hill and through the corridor window?”

Urchin offered a prayer for Sepia, and ran. But not as fast as he could. If Crispin's old wound was hurting, Urchin could beat him conspicuously, and that wouldn't be fair.

Hour after hour, Mossberry brooded on his role as the Destroyer of Mistmantle, spitting out his medicine and shaking the bars on the window. *The Heart sent water, but sent me to bring fire.* He must offer up the island in flames, and then…? Then the Heart would honor him. What a pity the king and queen would not live to see his triumph.

As soon as he escaped from this cell, he must find the kitchens. That would be the place to find kindling and flints—and oil. He would need oil.

He returned to his work of clawing at the bars and shaking them. He still cried out *Freedom! Calamity!* but he no longer wanted to warn anyone. All he wanted was to cover the sound of his teeth and claws on the window bars.

The queen, Catkin, and Oakleaf were waiting in the Throne Room. Padra, Fingal, and Tide arrived, and Whittle pattered in to join them.

"How is Mossberry?" asked Whittle.

"Quieter, thank goodness," said the queen. "I've been sending him medicine to calm his mind. But that's only the first step."

"It's a great relief to us all, Your Majesty," said Docken. "It's bad enough waiting for another rage tide without listening to a mad squirrel having a tantrum. And if there's another wave to come, I wish it would just do its worst and get it over with. It's such a fine afternoon, madam, it's a great pity the young ones can't mess about on the shore as they used to do."

"Jumping the waves," said Catkin wistfully. "And skimming stones. Brother Juniper's really good at that."

"I taught him to do that," said Fingal with pride.

"So you keep reminding us," said Padra.

“Sometimes it feels as if we’ll never do that again,” said Oakleaf wistfully.

There was a scrabbling of paws on the wall outside; then they heard Crispin’s voice.

“Urchin!” he called. “If you let me win, you’re on sword polishing for three days!”

With a twirling of tails, Urchin and Crispin leaped side by side through the window.

“Where’s Juniper?” asked the king, breathing hard.

“Your Majesty,” said Padra, “the seas are gathering. You’ll soon get your wish, Docken.”

Juniper was on the way down the turret stairs to the meeting when a wave of nausea seized him, and his head swam. The words of prophecy were the same as before, but clearer than ever.

One must come and one must go,
One must go and one will come,
There will be sorrow before joy.

It took a few deep breaths before he could gather himself together; he put his paws against the wall to keep himself from falling. Then he ran stumbling down the stairs to the Throne Room. The second wave was coming. When he entered, he found an atmosphere of sharp alertness.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty,” he said.

“Juniper, are you all right?” asked the king. Juniper gave the brief nod that meant that he wasn’t all right, but he’d rather not discuss it.

“We met here to report back and plan our next step,” said Crispin, “but from what Padra tells me, everything has become more urgent.”

“It has, Your Majesty,” said Juniper.

“The second wave of the flood will be on us tonight,” announced Padra.

“And there will be terrible upheaval with it,” said Juniper. “I don’t know what will happen, but there is great change to come and pain to bear. I can feel it all around us. ‘Sorrow before joy.’ But that means that there will be joy.”

“We’re as ready as we can be for the wave to come,” said Padra. “Most of our animals are still safely inland and on high ground.”

“Then we’ll get the others inside and clear the tower again,” said Crispin. “Mossberry will have to be moved under guard.”

“And we still haven’t found Furtle and Ouch,” Urchin reminded him. “They’re always one step ahead of us, but the trail seemed to lead uphill and inland.”

“Hope and the moles are following it,” said Crispin.

“Shall I go back to join them?” asked Urchin.

“Yes, and warn them all of the next wave,” said Crispin. “At this stage only search inland, not near the coasts. Try the burrows we used years ago, when the landslide came. Round up any animals you meet on the way. Take warm cloaks. And, all of you, remember that your confidence will be the confidence of the island. Be strong, be cheerful, be confident. Juniper, your blessing, please.”

Juniper raised a paw. “May the Heart bring us from sorrow to joy,” he said. “May the Heart that broke with love and still loves us kindle love among us. Heart help us.” He took the bag with the Heartstone and lifted it over his head.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “I think you should carry it now.”

There was a moment of solemn silence. Everyone knew that they should leave the tower at once, but to move or speak too soon would seem disrespectful.

Fists hammered on the door. Scufflen, breathless, burst in.

“Beg pardon, Your Majesty,” he cried, “Mossberry’s escaped! And there’s smoke coming from the kitchens!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EPIA HAD NO IDEA where she might be, and with every second she cared less. All she wanted was for the pain in her head and limbs to go away, and the burning in her throat to stop. She curled into a ball, biting on her paw.

After the first wave of the rage tide had subsided and the sun had risen, she had found herself beyond the mists. Further than that, she had had no idea where she was. There had been no sight of land.

Rocking on the open sea, she hardly believed that everything she had ever loved was over. She could never go home to Mistmantle. There was no way back through the mists. She would either die on the open sea, or find another island where she could live. She would never in all her life again see her family, her home, her friends, her little choir. She would never again see the king and queen; and the children who had been in her care since they had been tiny; Padra, who had always been so kind to her; Urchin, Urchin. She bit her lip and told herself that crying wouldn't help, but it was no good. Crying was all she could do.

She felt she had never really appreciated Mistmantle with its greenness, its cliffs, its shores and the jetty, and, most of all, the animals. She hadn't even said good-bye. She would have given all her future to run through Anemone Wood again.

Take a few deep breaths, she had told herself. Then she had looked in the storage under the rowing benches and found, to her great relief, stores of fresh water, nuts, berries, and biscuits. The boat must have been prepared by Mossberry's followers. There was hope.

She had tried not to think about Urchin, but when she did, she remembered that he had left the island and returned, flying on a swan. Perhaps she would find a swan to carry her home! She had no idea where to find one, but it was something to hope for. She took the oars and rowed as hard as she could, with no sense of direction.

She rationed the food and water, but days and nights had passed, and soon only a pawful of nuts and berries was left, and less than half a bottle of water. Hunger had gnawed at her, and at nights the cold had kept her awake so that she had rowed on, or lain tightly huddled up and shivering, hugging herself for warmth. When the food was all gone she had scooped up trailing seaweed and eaten that—it was nasty, but better than nothing. She had discovered too late that it made her thirsty. When rain had fallen, she tipped back her head to drink and caught as much as she could in an empty water flask, praying for food and land. With blisters on her paws, she had rowed on, not knowing where she was. At last, a dark rock had risen against the horizon.

Stiff, wet, and desperately thirsty, she had rowed the boat to shore and climbed out to pull it high onto the dry ground—but her legs buckled under her and she crawled exhausted from the sea. She was so weakened that she would have left the boat where it was, but she couldn't risk it floating away on the tide. She had pulled, waded back into the sea, and pushed, and finally secured the boat in a high cave. Then, still wet, she limped and crawled across the sand and, at last, heard the sweetest music she had known in all her life. It was the sound of trickling water.

She followed the sound. Sparkling water danced downhill from a spring and spilled over into a stream. Leaning over it, she saw fish swimming, so it must be safe to drink, and she had been almost too thirsty to care. Scooping her sore, cracked paws into it, she drank deeply. Cold, clear water slipped down her throat. *Oh, that was good. Heart be praised.* She had crawled back to the boat, curled up in it, and slept.

If only this could be a dream, and she would wake up in a warm nest with breakfast to look forward to. She would help Princess Almondflower to dress, she would take her to play on the beach, she would sing with her choir, and her friends would be there. Urchin would be there. Was he thinking of her? Poor Urchin. He must be worried.

Throbbing pain in her head woke her, and spread down her neck and shoulders. She tried to raise her head, and couldn't. She wondered if she might be dying.

If she must die, she would. At least the pain would go away. But to die here, all alone? Nobody would ever know what had happened. Urchin and her family would wonder and worry all their lives. A tear scalded her cheek.

Mossberry had, at last, wrenched away the bars from his window. He darted down the wall, found a ground-floor window that had been broken in the flood, and slipped through it. Fire, he needed fire.

The kitchen had been deserted and was now gray and cold with no fire in the grate, but dry flints and kindling lay on a shelf above it. All he needed now was oil, and it didn't take long to find that. There was brandy, too, which suited his purpose perfectly. He laughed aloud. The Heart must have provided all this for him.

"I am the chosen Destroyer," he muttered. He loved that title. He uncorked the heavy jar of oil and dragged it behind him, leaving a trail and sprinkling it with brandy.

Start with the tower. It would be easy to set a fire in the kitchen, but outside he'd need the oil and brandy. He assembled dry leaves on the floor, struck the flints, and kindled it, blowing gently until a wisp of smoke curled upward and the twigs crackled. Some firewood had been stored on a high shelf, and was still dry. He fed the fire, then ran to leap from the window. The jagged pane gashed his shoulder and he twisted to lick the cut, but, standing outside in the late, cool air, he was proud of his wound. He began to walk around the tower, sprinkling oil and brandy like a sorcerer casting a spell.

"Everyone out!" ordered Crispin. "I'll search for Mossberry myself."

"The guards are already clearing the tower, Your Majesty," said Scufflen.

"Your Majesty—" began Padra.

"Yes, Padra," said Crispin. "Come with me. Juniper and I will need you. Docken, you, too. Urchin"—Urchin had dropped to one knee to ask to be allowed to help—"go…"

"Father!" cried Catkin from the window. "Look!"

Crispin darted to her side with all of them following. Urchin put his paw to his sword hilt.

“It’s Mossberry,” said the king, leaning to look down. “He’s making a trail of something—looks as if it could be oil—and that looks like a bottle of spirits, probably brandy. And he has—it’s hard to see—yes, he has flints in his paws.” He turned to face them. “All of you, get down the tunnel the mole guards use, *now*. Mossberry won’t set the oil alight until he’s circled the tower completely. Get as far away as you can. Except you, Fingal, you go to the Spring Gate and swim to safety. The rest of you, down the tunnels. Yes, Urchin, you, too.”

“Sir—”

“Orders, Urchin!”

Orders must be obeyed. Urchin and the other squirrels dashed along the corridor, looking for a tunnel.

“This one’s flooded,” he said.

“And this,” said the queen.

“They all are,” said Catkin.

“We’ll just have to take the walls,” said Cedar.

They found a window, and ran down the walls. Queen Cedar sniffed the air.

“Yes, it’s brandy,” she said.

“It’ll go up like wildfire if he lights it,” said Urchin. “Everyone run for the burrows.”

“Catkin, Oakleaf,” called the queen, “we’ll be needed at the burrows.”

Urchin didn’t have to look around to sense the mutinous look on Catkin’s face.

“The king and queen have both ordered you to go, Catkin,” he said. “Go. Those hedgehogs are still missing—keep a lookout for them on the way, it’s more urgent than ever that we find them.”

“He’s right, Catkin,” said Prince Oakleaf, taking her paw and breaking into a run. “And it’s orders.” This time, Catkin didn’t resist. Queen Cedar looked over her shoulder. Urchin had not moved.

“Urchin…” she said.

“I’ll watch you safely out of sight,” he said. “The king ordered me to go. He didn’t order me not to return.”

She didn’t argue. The other squirrels dashed for safety and Urchin ran around the side of the tower. A gust of wind caught him in the face and carried Mossberry’s voice to him.

Mossberry had taken his place at the foot of the tower stairs. He had splashed brandy and oil on the ground, and thrown down dry kindling. High in his paws, he held the flints.

From somewhere in the shadows, a hedgehog was running to Mossberry. Docken darted forward, but Mossberry held a flint in each hand as if he were about to strike a spark.

“Keep away, Docken, traitor!” he shrieked. “Keep away! I am doing the Heart’s work! This tower and this island and I, too, will be offered up in flames!”

“That’s Ruffle!” shouted Docken. “That hedgehog, that’s Ruffle! Ruffle, come here! It’s not safe!”

But Ruffle wasn’t interested in anyone but Mossberry. With a sword in her paw she ran to him, threw herself at his paws, and clutched his ankles.

“She’ll distract him,” said Crispin quietly. “This might give us a chance.”

“Brother Mossberry, Master!” she cried. “Save us!”

Mossberry glanced down at the wailing figure at his paws. At every noise behind him, he turned, raising the flints.

“Get up,” he ordered her. “Stand at my back and guard me.”

She stood back-to-back with him, brandishing the sword. “Save us!” she cried.

“Trust me!” yelled Mossberry.

“So now he has a hostage,” muttered Padra, “and somebody to watch his back. Has she any idea that he intends to send us all up in flames?”

The rising wind whipped clouds across the sky. If it fanned a flame, the stair could be blazing in seconds. Light rose and fell over Mossberry’s wild face, over King Crispin, Padra, and Docken a little way off, over Juniper standing to one side.

“Talk to me, Mossberry,” the king was saying calmly. “Tell me what the Heart tells you. Work with me, Mossberry.”

“Keep away!” yelled Mossberry. “You evil slave to an evil queen!”

“Come to me, Mossberry,” said Crispin gently. “The Heart loves you, and doesn’t want you to burn. Come to me.”

Urchin was careful to watch Crispin and Mossberry, but from the corner of his eye he could see what Juniper was doing, too. Slowly, from the side, he was edging nearer to Mossberry.

“It’s Juniper!” squeaked Ruffle.

“Keep away, false priest!” yelled Mossberry. “I know you’re there!”

An unmistakeable sound reached Urchin. It was the striking of flints. A spark flew into the air, and blew away on the wind.

“Keep still!” Mossberry cried. “Don’t come near me!”

“Come and talk to me,” called Crispin. “Come and explain to me, Mossberry. I’m listening to you.”

Urchin knew that Mossberry hadn’t seen him. If he made a noise or ran, and distracted Mossberry’s attention, it might just give Crispin a chance to dash in and overpower him. But it might be a terrible mistake. Any diversion might scare Mossberry into striking the flints.

Ruffle was watching straight ahead of her. Cautiously, Urchin stepped sideways.

“Who’s there!” demanded Mossberry. “Who’s that?”

Mossberry whirled around. A movement from Juniper caught Urchin’s eye, but it was too quick for him to see what was happening. Then Mossberry screamed with rage, the flints were on the ground, and Crispin and the captains were rushing in to disarm Ruffle and bring Mossberry to the ground. Urchin ran to join them.

“Well done, Juniper!” said Padra.

“What happened?” asked Urchin.

“Lovely shot!” said Docken. “Help me hold him, Urchin, while I get my sword belt off to tie his paws. It was Brother Juniper. He always was the winner at skimming stones. Knocked the flints clean out of Mossberry’s paws.”

“You gave me the chance, Urchin,” said Juniper. “He was distracted long enough for me to pick up the pebble and spin it. I knew I’d only get one chance.”

“Treacherous, evil priest!” screamed Mossberry.

“His mind’s so sick, he can’t tell good from bad,” said Crispin. “We’ll get him to the burrows. He’ll have to be kept tied and watched every moment.”

“Oh, good!” said a voice. “I was hoping I’d get something useful to do!”

Crispin glanced up.

“Fingal,” he said, “I sent you to the Spring Gate.”

“You didn’t tell me to stay there, Your Majesty!” said Fingal. He strode toward them, the silver bracelet gleaming on his wrist, and a bag over his shoulder. “I needed to get to safety, I just thought I’d come this way. By the way, I taught Juniper to skim stones.”

“That’s true, Your Majesty,” said Juniper.

“Otters!” exclaimed Crispin.

“Up into the hills, then,” said Padra. “We’ve wasted enough time.” A gust of wind whipped the cloaks around them as they helped Mossberry and Ruffle to their paws and turned to walk into the safety of the hills.

“Don’t hurt him!” cried Ruffle.

“Nobody’s going to hurt him,” said Crispin, “or you, Ruffle. Are you harmed? Tell me where you got the sword from and I’ll put it back.”

“Plague and curses on every one of you!” wailed Mossberry. “I call down curses on—”

“How many points for plagues and curses?” asked Fingal. He took something from the bag and popped it into Mossberry’s mouth. “Eat that and be quiet.”

“What is it?” asked Crispin as they walked.

“Toffee,” he said. “Crackle makes it and it’s really good. Well, I thought, the storerooms will either flood or catch fire, and if Mossberry very sensibly rescued the brandy, I should rescue the toffee on my way out. Don’t worry too much about kitchens, sir, they’re sure to be flooded in no

time. It would be a crime to let it be swept away to sea. Wouldn’t be good for the fishes. Anyone else want a toffee?”

“Urchin,” said Crispin, “find my family, please, and make sure they’re safe. Fingal, haven’t you always been told? Always show courtesy to an animal who can’t defend himself.” But from the tightness of his voice and the quickness of his speech, Urchin knew that, in spite of the situation or perhaps because of it, the king wanted to laugh. He bowed, and ran off in search of Cedar.

CHAPTER TWELVE

S NIGHT FELL, the wind grew stronger and colder. Urchin worked his way uphill, wrapping his cloak around him. The swishing of the sea below usually sounded like a mother shushing a child. Now it was snarling. Scrabbling uphill, leaping over fallen branches, he ran on. Trees swayed and creaked, and Urchin swerved to avoid an ancient birch tree as the trunk bent and splintered. Tail and paws outstretched, he ran until the sound of voices far off made him stop.

He sat up to listen, his ears twitching, distracted by the screeching wind and groaning trees. The voices were coming from farther uphill on his right, and he followed the sound—the queen's voice and the tearful whimpering of a young squirrel. He dashed at full stretch toward them.

"It's Urchin!" called Whittle. "Over here, Urchin!"

As he drew nearer, he could see what was happening. A tree had fallen, and a small squirrel, squeaking in fear and distress, lay trapped underneath a huge and heavy branch.

"Twirl!" he said. It was the little chorister Sepia had rescued that night. Catkin, Whittle, Oakleaf, and Cedar were there; Queen Cedar talked to the squirrel as the others heaved at the branch.

"Urchin, you're just the animal we need," said the queen. Her paws and fur were smeared with mud, and she held firmly to Twirl's paw. "We have to move this tree, quickly, and it's solid. There's no time to look for an ax to cut it."

Urchin joined the others in heaving at the splintered branch, but it wouldn't move.

"Why weren't you in a burrow, Twirl?" he asked.

"I just came out for a little look," she said, her voice high and tight. "I thought the wind might blow Sepia home. I want her to come home."

"So do I," said Urchin. "And if she were here she'd want you to be warm and safe in a burrow. After three, everybody heave. One—two—

THREE!”

The branch moved a little and Twirl tried to wriggle free, but it wasn’t enough. Straining with all their might they tried again, but it was no use.

“It’s not going to move, Your Majesty,” said Urchin. “We could scrabble the earth away from around Twirl and underneath her.”

“We’ll have to take care how we do it,” said Queen Cedar. “There might be people sheltering underneath, but only an inch or two might make all the difference. She’s little, she might be able to wriggle out. One more try. Come around this end. The leverage might be better.”

This time, the branch moved a little more. Twirl shrieked.

“Stop!” cried the queen. “It’s hurting her. Right, Urchin, we’ll get digging. Just a little at a time.”

“Catkin, come on this side with me,” said Urchin. He and Catkin dug the earth free at one side and Whittle and Oakleaf at the other, while Queen Cedar scraped at the soil around Twirl’s head.

“Can you shuffle to your left a bit, Twirl?” the queen was saying. She was still calm for Twirl’s sake, but Urchin knew that the time was short. “A bit farther. Good girl. I think we can get you out now. Now, all of you, just get your paws under the branch and lift it as much as you can. Ready?”

With all their strength, the squirrels hoisted the branch upward. It was too heavy to lift more than a few inches, but it gave Cedar the room she needed to slip her paws under Twirl’s shoulders and pull.

“She’s still not free,” said Cedar, “but she’s moving. Hold on to the branch.”

Twirl was pushing her feet against the earth, trying to heave her way out. There was sweat in Urchin’s fur, and pain burned in his shoulders. Catkin’s paws were shaking.

“Deep breaths, Catkin,” he gasped.

“And…out!” cried the queen in triumph as, with a heave and a wriggle, Twirl was free. “Well done, everyone!” They dropped the branch with a rustling crash, and the queen helped Twirl to stand up, brushing dust and debris from her fur. “Now, everyone into the burrows! Twirl, take my paw!”

“Oh!” squeaked Twirl. The queen was already reaching for her paw, but it was too late. Twirl had vanished.

“The ground gave way!” cried the queen.

“Ouch!” said Twirl from underground.

“Oh!” said a little voice. “Hello!”

Furtle and Ouch had no idea that the play palace had crumbled behind them. After much wandering underground, eating worms, and getting lost, they had found a pleasant little burrow. It even had bedding in it. There were biscuits, but they looked old and not very nice, and they agreed that they’d rather have fresh earwigs than stale biscuits. They enjoyed a supper of beetles, and Furtle had been wondering whether to go farther or settle down for the night. It looked cozy. In fact, she was just thinking of shaping the bedding into a comfortable nest around Ouch and telling him a story when Twirl fell through the roof.

Looking up, Furtle saw a lot of anxious faces looking down at them. There was a lady squirrel who had dirt on her face, but she looked so kind and so like somebody’s mommy that Furtle realized all of a sudden how much she missed her own mother. It was as if she hadn’t missed her until now, but now several days’ worth of missing rushed on her at once.

“This looks like one of Linty’s hiding places!” said Urchin.

Cedar dropped into the burrow. “I’m Queen Cedar,” she said. “Are you Furtle?”

“Yes,” said Furtle, “and this is my brother Spirtle—we call him Ouch…and we want our mommy.” Then they both began to cry, quietly at first, then very loudly.

“Come with us and we’ll find her,” said the queen gently. She lifted one tearful hedgehog, then another up to the waiting arms of Urchin and Catkin. Finally, she lifted Twirl to the surface. “Oakleaf, give me a paw up, please.”

“Just in time,” she whispered as they pulled her out. “After the tree fell, the entire roof would have caved in. Let’s get them to a safe place

quickly, and hold on tightly to their paws so they can't lose themselves again. Oakleaf, run ahead, find a messenger—let everyone know they're found. Tell them to look out for the search party." She bent down to Twirl. "Sweetheart, are you badly hurt?"

"I can walk," she said, but a sudden gust nearly blew her over. Urchin took off his cloak and wrapped it around her, and the wind, sharp as knives, cut him to the bone. He reached down into the burrow, brought out the blankets, and wrapped them around Furtle and Ouch. With the queen and Whittle carrying a hedgehog each, and Twirl on Urchin's back, they all bent their heads against the storm and struggled uphill.

By the time they reached the burrows, news that Furtle and Ouch were safe had spread among the crammed animals. Lanterns were lit at all the entrances to welcome them. Paws reached out to receive them. Furtle and Ouch's parents had been sent for, and a rush of little girl squirrels ran to meet Twirl.

"Keep an eye on her, Catkin," advised the queen. "She's already been rescued twice."

"They've got a lovely fire going in there," said Whittle. "Urchin, aren't you coming to get warm?"

"In a moment," said Urchin. The wind was merciless, but he felt he couldn't face the chattering excitement in the burrows just now. Mistmantle animals could make anything into a party—even though they were squashed into hilltop burrows in a crisis, they had begun to sing. There would be hot spiced drinks soon. Somebody would find currants for Furtle and Ouch.

Behind him something roared, and as he turned, the wind threw him against the hillside, knocking the breath out of him. The second wave! The sea roared, surged, and lifted, as if the waves, goaded to fury, had reared up on their hind legs to leap on Mistmantle and tear it to pieces. Over trees, rock, and moss, the second wave crashed and broke into wild spray. Higher and higher it rose, crashing over homes, flinging down trees before it. As he watched, the sea overwhelmed his island, while behind him the animals laughed, sang, hugged each other, and passed hot drinks around. Rain lashed into his face, and he pulled his hood closer.

"Urchin!" called a voice. "In here!"

“Juniper!” said Urchin. “How did you get here?”

“We’ve secured Mossberry under extra guards in the highest burrow, and the king said we should come down here. Urchin, you’ve had enough for one day. Get in here.”

Juniper took his arm and pulled him into a simple, bare chamber hollowed out from the hillside. At once, everything around him was still. A few candles burned and, slowly, a kind of peace settled in Urchin’s heart. He couldn’t be happy knowing that Sepia, if she were alive, must be at the mercy of that wild sea, but he could at least be quiet. He longed for the sanctuary of the Chamber of Candles or Juniper’s turret. Those places were out of reach now, but he was glad to be in this still place with its earth-smelling walls and candlelight. Suddenly, he was so tired.

At times like this it was good to touch the bracelet made from his mother’s fur. He curled his paw over it and closed his eyes.

“Heart, look after Sepia,” he prayed. “Heart help her.” He thought of his parents, the father who had been killed before Urchin’s birth, the mother who had died giving birth to him.

Can you see her? Mother, Father, can you see her? Can you help her? Mother, will you look after her?

Singing reached him, and he sank his head into his paws. Those were the songs Sepia had taught, and he could hardly bear to hear them. He was glad when it stopped, but then a shuffling of paws told him that they had company. Dutifully, not wanting to speak, he raised his head—but it was only Apple, his foster mother. Her familiar voice, her walk, and the green cloak were comforting.

“I thought Brother Juniper would have found you somewhere nice and quiet, and I was right, he has,” she said, sitting down beside him and wrapping the cloak around herself. “I’m getting too old for all this coming and going, Urchin, and mind, we’re all having a good sing in there, but, ooh, I don’t know what sort of a state our homes will be in when it’s all over, if it ever is over, makes you wonder. And that little Twirl, do you know what she’s saying? She’s saying she wants ’em all to sing for Sepia when she comes home, and Princess Catkin says she’ll organize it all, and there’ll be all Sepia’s little choirs all singing to welcome her back.” When Urchin didn’t respond, she went on. “She will, you know, your Sepia, she’ll

get back. She may look like a little thing that'll blow away in a high wind, she may be as gentle as a blossom in spring, but you know what? Are you listening, you know what? She's as tough as a tree root, your Sepia. Tough as oak. Didn't she warn the king against that traitor hedgehog, and stand up to him, too? And she were just a little bit of a lass then. Didn't she rescue the princess when she were a baby, and when them ravens attacked, didn't she do her bit? And hasn't she survived? She'll survive this, too."

Apple was only prattling on as she always did, but she could be right. Urchin began to feel encouraged.

"You've served the island well," she said. "I'm right proud of you. And here's Juniper, looking after you. Give me a paw up, Juniper, I'll leave our Urchin alone, but I had to come and see him. Thank you, Juniper, Brother Juniper, I should say." And she waddled away.

"I don't want to give you false hopes," said Juniper, "but I think Apple's right. Sepia's alive. I told you before, it was as if she were tugging and calling for help, as if she's out there somewhere like a light bobbing about. The light hasn't gone out."

"How do you mean?" asked Urchin.

"It's hard to explain," said Juniper, "but I worked with Sepia a lot when she helped to look after Brother Fir, and I have a sense for her spirit, just as I have for yours. There's a shining quality to Sepia, and I can feel it's still there. I think I'd feel the emptiness if she no longer existed."

"She may never get home," said Urchin.

"Maybe not," admitted Juniper.

"I just wish we knew something," said Urchin. "There's been no word from Corr."

"I know," said Juniper. "That's hard. But I do believe she's alive."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

N DARKNESS AND POURING RAIN, Corr and Crown fought to keep the lurching boat from sinking. There was land close by, but no hope at all of turning the boat to reach it. In the relentless rain and waves, they were barely staying afloat.

“Heart help us!” yelled Corr, and hoped that the Heart heard the crying of his own heart though the fury and crash of the waves drowned out his voice. The boat lurched and tipped, water swirling around Corr’s paws. He bailed furiously. Crown’s strong beak held the tiller as the little boat pitched. A wave flung itself over them. Spray blinded Corr. A second wave hurled him into the water and threw him back against the boat, knocking the breath from him. Gripping the side with both paws he heaved himself back in, tumbling onto the soaked benches, and when he raised his head he saw something he had never seen before, and would never forget.

The sea advanced like the charge of an army. At first, it looked like a great wave building up behind them, gaining on them, faster and faster. Then it reared up, roaring like a great wild creature, ready to devour them. They could either ride this wave, or disappear beneath it.

“Turn the boat!” he yelled.

Against the bullying of the sea, Crown wrenched the tiller. The boat turned.

“Now *fly*!” shouted Corr. “Let me take the boat! Fly home! There’s no point in both of us dying!”

Maybe Crown hadn’t heard—but there was no time to think about that as the monstrous wave rose, roared, and swept them up. All Corr knew was that he was sinking under its power, then flung up like driftwood and tossed backward and forward. He was under the water, over the water—the boat was there, but it was upside down—now it was right way up—he had no idea what had happened to Crown. The sea caught him again. This time, it flung him onto shingle that bruised him, grazed him, and knocked the

breath from his body. The next wave washed him like seaweed farther onto the shore.

Battered and half drowned, he crawled farther inland. He didn’t get far. Exhaustion overwhelmed him, and he slept.

Sunrise woke him. He tried to sit up and found he was almost too stiff and sore to move, but the pain of the bruises reassured him that he was alive.

“Thank you, Heart,” he whispered.

Gradually, he managed to sit up, scent the air, and look about him. The sea was flat, calm, and sparkling, as if trying to convince him that it couldn’t possibly have wreaked destruction the previous night. The land was almost completely bare. A few thin trees sprouted and a stream ran down the hillside, but there was no sign of any living creature. A black mountain towered above him. Putting out a paw to the nearest rock, he found it smooth and shiny.

“Corr! Corr!” The thin croak was barely recognizable, but it was Crown’s voice. Corr struggled to stand, and hobbled painfully across the shingle as the cry came again.

Crown lay sprawled in the shelter of a rock, one wing tucked in and the other spread out behind him. Beyond him, scattered across the shore, was all that remained of their boat.

“Crown!” Corr knelt painfully beside him. “Can you get up?”

Crown raised himself a little, and collapsed again. “Most of the boat broke around me,” he said, and his voice was low with pain. “I think my wing’s broken. I need you to look at my foot, there’s something digging into it.”

Corr examined Crown’s foot. The sight of the splinter that had driven through the web made his stomach churn.

“I can pull it out,” he said, “but it’ll hurt.”

Crown gave him a stern look to remind him that he was the son of the great Lord Arcneck. Corr gritted his teeth, braced his back paws against a stone, gripped the splinter with both forepaws, and pulled. There was one low moan through a tightly clamped beak from Crown, and it was out.

“I’ll try to find something to bandage it with,” said Corr. “If our supplies have survived at all we should still have some mendingmoss.”

“That’s for Sepia,” said Crown. “Salt water will heal it.” He limped slowly to the water and floated in the shallows, his broken wing trailing. Corr followed him in case he collapsed again, then surveyed the wreckage of the boat.

The food had been wrapped in moss and dock leaves and wedged under the stern seating, and most had survived. The water supplies were intact, too, as well as the mendingmoss and the honey from Whitewings. But the boat itself—Corr tried to work out a way to make a raft from what was left of it. It would depend on what he could find on the island, but it didn’t look promising. There didn’t seem to be anything much here. He stepped back to take a good look upward, and turned hot and cold when he realized exactly what he was looking at.

“Corr!” he shouted, and stumbled down the shore. “This island! It’s been destroyed by fire! That’s a fire mountain! We’re on Ashfire!”

Sepia slept and woke again and drifted from one to the other, not always sure if she was sleeping or not. Now and again a wave of peace would sweep through her, and it seemed as if death were wrapping her in a bed, rocking and soothing her. Then she would remember that she had to live, even though she didn’t know why. In her clearer moments she remembered Mistmantle, Urchin, the tower, her music, and her friends, but those moments were fewer all the time. When she did wake, she found the pain in her paws had gone. That was a lovely feeling. She wasn’t even sure where her paws were anymore. Little by little, it seemed that her body had stopped working. Her eyelids did not want to open.

“Crown!” yelled Corr. “I’ve found her! Sepia, wake up!”

She heard someone calling her name, and thought it was the voice of death. Death had been calling to her all night. But the voice of death in the night had been gentle and soothing, and this voice disturbed her peace, dragging her back from her deep, dark rest.

“Sepia!” called Corr. “Can you hear me?”

With an arm behind her shoulders, he sat her up. He knew a few moments of wonderful, triumphant joy as he found her sleeping in the boat. He had done what he had come to do, he had found Sepia. He could bring her home, and all Mistmantle would celebrate. But she lay motionless and didn't respond to his call. Sickeningly, he thought she was dead, but at a second glance the pulse showed clearly in the pitifully thin wrist. Sitting her up, he saw that her eyes were still closed, and her face haggard. *Don't die. Please, please. You mustn't die, not now.*

Crown came to stand beside him. "This boat is in one piece," he said. "We can get her to Mistmantle, but we'll have to be quick."

"We can't get her through the mists," said Corr. "You can't fly her over like that."

"We'll find a way," said Crown. "Don't argue. Just move the boat."

Together, with muscles already aching, they heaved the boat to the shore.

"Give her water," said Crown, "the water we brought with us. We know it's safe."

Corr trickled a few drops of water into Sepia's mouth. It would be good to find a stream here and top up the water, but Sepia seemed so ill that time might be vital. Besides, Crown was right. They knew the water they had brought would be safe.

With the boat out of the cave and in the sunlight, Corr could see even more clearly how ill Sepia was. Her frailty scared him. Her whole body was thinner than he remembered, and her wrist felt as light as a twig. He dripped more water into her mouth, and this time he stroked her throat, because she seemed too weak to swallow it without help.

"There's a drink you can make with mendingmoss," said Crown. "It will do her good."

"Then we'll have to make it on the way," said Corr. "We can't waste time here."

The thought of rowing all the way back to Mistmantle was crushing, and Corr couldn't help thinking that it wasn't fair—why did it all have to depend on him, one bruised and aching otter who'd already rowed the length and breadth of seas and been shipwrecked? But in the next moment, he felt proud of those bruises and that shipwreck. Urchin would be proud of

him, too. Perhaps all adventurers got tired and dispirited sometimes. And whose idea had it been in the first place? His.

It wasn't the way he'd imagined it. He'd pictured himself wrapping Sepia warmly in the cloak he had brought from Mistmantle, but it had been drenched in the storm. With help from Crown, he fastened it to the mast to use as a sail until the wind had blown it dry. The jar of honey from Queen Larch was intact, and when he opened it, the scent of warmth, sweetness, and herbs was so powerful, so full of summer, that he thought even the smell of it would do Sepia good. He dipped his claw into it, and stroked it onto her tongue. At last, as if the effort were almost too great, she swallowed.

"It will make you well, Sepia," he said. "Home now."

They traveled on, day and night, Crown and Corr taking turns to stay awake. Crown refused to use the precious mendingmoss on his injured foot, preferring to swim from time to time to let the salt water heal it. The sight of the broken wing trailing in the water troubled Corr, but there was nothing to do except to wait for it to heal itself.

Making the mendingmoss drink for Sepia was difficult. Crown had only a vague idea of how much to use and how long to infuse it, and they had no means of heating the water. But they did the best they could, and three times a day they poured a few drops of the infusion into Sepia's mouth. As the nights grew cool, Crown would spread his good wing over her to keep her warm.

The yellow cloak, once dried—and when they didn't need a sail—was wrapped around her. Corr thanked the Heart for that cloak, warm and lined. He hoped he hadn't deprived anyone of it, but by keeping her warm and dry it could be saving her life.

Every time he gave her food or water, she was a little more responsive. She began to swallow more easily and sometimes her eyelids flickered open, but she had fits of shivering so violent that Corr was afraid. Often, she cried out as if in pain or distress. Every time he put an arm around her shoulders to raise her head for a drink, he could feel the sharpness of her shoulder blades just beneath the skin. The idea that a heart could still beat in this drained little body amazed him. He crushed the hazelnuts he had brought from Mistmantle, mixed them with honey and water, and used a

nutshell as a cup to slip the mixture into her mouth. Corr narrowed his eyes and gazed at the horizon, but they were still not in sight of the mists.

"We should talk to her," said Crown. "She might be able to hear us, and it could help her to hold on."

Crown talked to her about the welcome waiting for her on Mistmantle, about the rage tide and the war against the ravens, and about his own island with its swans and squirrels. As night fell and Crown slept, Corr tucked the cloak around her and sang the Mistmantle lullaby.

Waves of the seas,
Wind in the trees,
Spring-scented breeze
For your sleeping, sleeping…

"You'll sing again, Sepia," he said. "Stay with us. Stay with us. You'll be well. There's only one thing in the world that I want, Sepia, and that's to take you back to Urchin. How can I look him in the face if I go back without you?"

She blinked. For the first time, her eyes opened fully, dark eyes that looked too big for the pinched face. Then she winced, and her eyes closed again. He gave her mendingmoss water, and wrapped the cloak around her.

"Heart help us," he said. "Heart, keep her alive."

Another morning came. Corr sat up, scanning the horizon with bright eyes, and his heart leaped.

"The mists, Sepia!" he said. "I can see the mists!"

Every stroke of the oars and every breeze brought them nearer to Mistmantle. But Sepia was still very weak, and Prince Crown's wing would be slow to mend. Corr had seen him try to fly, only to flounder onto the sea after a few yards. He couldn't possibly fly himself over the mists, let alone Sepia.

Around Mistmantle the sea lay calm and still, sparkling in the sunlight, but crops were destroyed, trees bent, and homes flooded. Mud and silt sprawled where flowers had grown, and, like so many of the animals, Juniper felt wretchedly tired. He knelt on a hillside near the tower. *Sorrow before joy.* He repeated the phrase to himself. Hadn't they had enough sorrow? Wasn't it time, surely, for joy? But still there was a sense that things were not complete, that the greatest thing was yet to happen, and he thought of King Crispin, and held him before the Heart. When he rose from his knees he was aware of Urchin waiting for him.

"The moles and otters have reported back," Urchin said. "It's all over now. No more rage tides."

"At last!" said Juniper.

Fingal was lolloping up the hill toward them. "Isn't it wonderful!" he said. "Look at that sea! It's trying to look innocent, after all it's done to us! Have either of you seen the king? I was worried about him. He's working harder than ever, and he's not himself. And there's Twirl, coming this way. What a small squirrel for such a steep hill!"

"And what on the island has she got there?" wondered Urchin. Her paws were full of something soft and white.

"Half a nest, I think," said Fingal. A feather drifted away on the breeze. "Yes, feathers!" He offered a paw to help Twirl up a particularly steep slope, but she was clutching all the feathers she could, and wouldn't let go.

"Hello, Twirl!" said Urchin. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes, thank you, and I found these," she said, holding out the feathers to Urchin. "The wave swished them up, so I chose the very nicest ones for you, to say thank you for helping me last night. Please, Urchin, sir, will Sepia come back?"

Urchin knelt down, and took the feathers from her. Fingal caught the stray ones that were blowing away.

"Thank you, Twirl," said Urchin. "That's really sweet of you. They're beautiful. And I don't know about Sepia, but we can all hope and pray."

She nodded, rushed to Juniper, hugged him tightly as he raised a paw in blessing, and ran away.

“Take care, Twirl!” Juniper called after her.

“I think she really wanted to give them to Sepia, but I’m the next best thing,” said Urchin.

“Poor little thing,” said Fingal. “What are you going to do with those?”

Urchin turned the feathers over in his paws. They were the small, downy feathers that are softest and lightest, best for pillows.

“Do you know where there are more like this?” he asked.

“They’ll be all over the shore, I should think,” said Fingal. He put one paw on Urchin’s shoulder and pointed with the other. “You see that little bay, there? That’s always been a good place to find feathers, but they must have been washed up higher in the rage tide. What a mess!”

As they walked down to the bay, Urchin saw how right Fingal had been about the mess. Trees had fallen, some onto burrows, leaving scattered nests. Broken plates and bottles lay where the storm had thrown them. Hedgehogs were clambering up and down the rocks, gathering up furniture to be repaired and clearing away debris. Tide, Swanfeather, and other otters were swimming to the shore with pots and pans, cloaks and crockery, rescued from the sea. Fionn sat in a rock pool, happily playing with her pet frog. Servants scuttled up and down the main stair of the tower with mops and buckets. Faces appeared at windows. Hope’s eager face looked out from Juniper’s turret, and he sniffed at the window boxes.

“He won’t fall out, will he?” asked Urchin.

“No, he’s perfectly safe,” said Juniper. “He knows what he’s doing. I should go and help him.”

“And I should be helping to get the tower back together,” said Urchin. “I don’t suppose the Spring Gate’s dried out yet, but I should go and see what the damage is.”

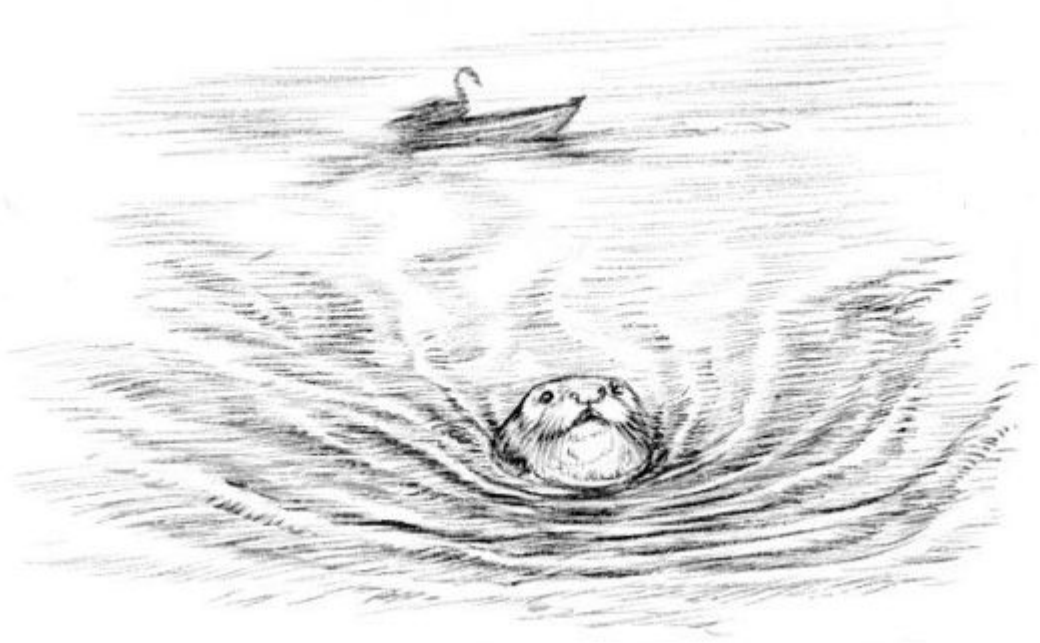
“And I should get out there with the otters,” said Fingal. “Race you down—what’s that? Urchin, look!”

“Where am I supposed to be looking?” asked Urchin.

“Out to sea!” said Fingal. “Right out against the mists!”

They watched. The bobbing head of an otter drew gradually nearer. They began to make guesses and tried not to, because it probably wasn’t—

“It is!” cried Urchin. “It’s Corr! Tell the king!” And he ran as he had never run in his life.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

INGAL PUSHED OUT HIS BOAT and rowed out to collect Corr—*And tell him to keep his head down in the boat,* Crispin had ordered. *We don't want all the island thronging around him. Bring him in quietly, by the Spring Gate.*

By the time Fingal's boat came ashore, a small number of animals had been summoned discreetly to the Throne Room. King Crispin was there, Queen Cedar, Princess Catkin, Docken, Arran and Padra, Juniper, Urchin, and Needle. They waited nervously, nobody saying much, until otter steps were heard in the corridor and Padra opened the door for Fingal and Corr.

"Well done, Corr," he said, putting a paw around Corr's shoulders. "Come to the king."

Urchin knew that if Corr had to go straight to the king, he must not interrupt. But his heart went out with care and gratitude to his page, who looked so worn, thinner than he had been, with weariness and the signs of hardship on his face. But there was a look about him, too, that Urchin had not see before. He looked, not only more grown-up, but wiser and stronger. There was a new nobility in Corr as he knelt before the king.

"Welcome home to Mistmantle, dearest Corr, brave Voyager, and well done," said the king, and raised him. "There is food and wine here for you, and we will hear your news."

"I've found Sepia, Your Majesties," he said, and, to the gasps of joy from every animal, glanced over his shoulder at Urchin. "She's very ill, sir, but she's alive."

Urchin put his paws over his eyes, aware of the press of Padra's paw on his shoulder. *She's alive. Nothing else matters. She's alive.* Needle hugged him.

"I've brought her as far as the mists," said Corr, "but I can't get her any farther—and she's very ill, Your Majesties."

"But alive!" said Crispin.

Urchin's mouth was dry, and he could hear his heart beating hard and fast. "How ill, Corr?" he asked.

"Tell us everything, Corr," said the king.

Corr told them, being as quick as he could without leaving anything out. When he came to the part about the Fire Island, the queen leaned forward, her claws clasped together and her face sharply attentive.

"We've kept her alive with water and honey, and something made out of mendingmoss," he said. "But the mists won't let us through, Your Majesty, and Crown won't be able to fly himself over, let alone Sepia. He's stayed with her; he's looking after her now."

"Then, Corr, you've done all you can for now," said Crispin, "and done it well. Take refreshment. Then, I'm afraid, we must ask you to set out again. Row to Swan Isle and ask, for the sake of Mistmantle, for another swan to come and carry her home."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty," said Corr. "They were all in a bad way when I was there, and that was before the second wave. I don't know if we could find one who could do it, especially one who could carry two—and Sepia couldn't go alone. She couldn't even hold on to a swan, not the way she is now."

"There isn't time to find out," said Cedar. "I'm sorry, Crispin. Corr, you said that when you found Sepia on Ashfire she was already ill?"

"Yes, madam," said Corr. "I thought it might just be hunger and thirst, but she still shudders and cries out." Needle held Urchin's paw tightly.

"And"—Urchin noticed that the queen's claws were clasped very tightly now—"had she drunk any of the water there? Did you bring any of that water with you?"

"We didn't need to, Your Majesty," he said. "We had plenty of fresh water with us. There was a stream on the island, but I don't know if she ever drank from it."

"She did," said the queen firmly. "I guessed it, as soon as you mentioned the island."

"Is it poisoned?" asked Crispin.

Urchin couldn't move or speak. *No, no, no,* filled his head. Needle folded both her paws over his. Across the room he felt Juniper's strong,

steady gaze.

The queen took a deep breath, and sighed. “I can’t remember much about the island,” she said, “but I know what I was told by my parents, and”—she glanced at Urchin—“by Almond of Whitewings. Ashfire water is dangerous to all living things who don’t come from there. Whatever poison it contains, Fire Islanders are born immune to it. I could drink it, it wouldn’t do me any harm. But Sepia couldn’t.”

“Will she die, Your Majesty?” asked Urchin. He had to know the worst.

“There is a cure,” said Cedar, “but it will take more than a day to infuse. The water and honey that Corr and Crown are giving her have kept her on this side of death, but I don’t know how much longer that will work. I can prepare a drink for her that will give her my immunity, so she can fight back, but it takes time to become strong enough. We need to keep her alive until it’s ready—then we must either get Sepia to the medicine, or the medicine to Sepia.”

“I’ll take it as soon as it’s ready!” said Corr.

“Thank you, Corr,” said the queen, “but sooner or later, we have to get her back. If she’s as weak as you say, she needs the best care we can give her. Excuse me. I’ll start making the infusion at once.”

“Can I help?” asked Urchin.

“Bring a pitcher of water from the Spring Gate,” she said briskly. “Bring it to the royal chambers, as quickly as you can.”

It was like being a page again. Urchin dashed to the kitchens, grabbed a pitcher, waded through floodwater to fill it, and ran back up the stairs. The queen was kindling a fire in the hearth. Small colored glass bottles were lined up beside her, and he watched her heat the water in a saucepan, adding a drop of this, a sprinkling of that, and a spoonful of something with a strong, warm scent. There was angelica in it, he could smell that. Not wanting to break her concentration he stayed still and silent, watching, desperately wanting to help.

“The blue bowl from the cupboard beside you, Urchin,” she said, not taking her eyes from the saucepan.

Urchin took the blue bowl and set it down beside her.

“Hold the pan,” she said. “It’s just about hot enough.”

Urchin took the handle and held the saucepan steadily over the fire. Cedar, still watching it, pinched a tuft of fur on her arm. With a sharp twist and a tug she had pulled it out, and dropped it into the blue bowl. A little pink patch showed on her arm.

“Your Majesty!” cried Urchin.

“It’s only fur,” she said. She tweaked out another tuft, this time from her shoulder, and dropped that, too, into the bowl.

“Nearly ready now,” she said. “Now pour the infused water over the fur until it’s halfway up the side of the bowl.”

Urchin poured it. The tufts of fur floated to the top. The queen stirred it, pressing them down with the back of the spoon.

“Is that it?” asked Urchin.

“Not quite,” she said. “It needs to mature, and I’ll have to keep adding to it. If she isn’t back on the island by the time it’s ready, Corr can take it out to her, but I’d rather have her here. She needs nursing.”

“Will it need more of your own fur?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she said. “It’s because I’m a native Ashfire Islander, so from tail to ear tufts I carry immunity. Something in me can fight the poisons in the water. By using my fur, I’m passing on my protection to Sepia.”

Here, at last, was something important he could do for Sepia. “Use my fur, too!” he said. “My mother was a Ashfire Islander, so I must be immune!”

She did not answer at once. “Please, Your Majesty!” he said. “I’m safely on the island, Sepia’s out beyond the mists and she could die. This is the only thing I can do for her, to make a difference!” But he could see from her eyes that it wasn’t so simple. He resented it. He didn’t want to be told that he was no use.

“I’m sorry, Urchin,” said Cedar. “It wouldn’t work with your fur. Your father came from Whitewings, and this only works with pure Ashfire fur. If we can get it into her she stands a reasonable chance of recovery, as long as Corr and Crown can keep her alive until it’s ready.”

“Then I’ll go to her,” said Urchin. “I can take her water from the spring, and cordials.”

“No, don’t,” said the queen, so firmly that he knew it would be a mistake to argue. “You know perfectly well that you’ve left the island twice, and nobody’s ever returned a third time. How would it be if we got Sepia back, but not you?”

Urchin didn’t want this to make sense, but it did. He bowed as the king came into the chamber.

“Pray and wait,” said the queen. “I know waiting is hard, but sometimes it’s all we can do.”

“We don’t have time to wait!” insisted Urchin.

The king sat down. He looked solemn, but calmer than he had been for some time.

“The important thing is that we know where she is,” he said. “There is more happening now than any of us fully understand. The Heart will not fail us. Wait, Urchin. It won’t be for long.”

Urchin nodded and, as he did so, caught sight of the bracelet on his wrist. He pulled at the knot with his claws, but it was tied tightly and would not be undone, so he plucked at the hairs.

“What are you doing?” asked the king.

“Urchin!” said Cedar. “Your mother’s fur!”

“Yes,” said Urchin. “She was pure Ashfire Islander, wasn’t she? Won’t her fur work in the medicine? Cedar, can you get a few strands out for me without spoiling it?”

With great care, not wanting to spoil the precious bracelet, Cedar pulled out a few hairs and dropped them into the pan. “That’ll help,” she said. “Another layer of immunity can only do good, and it may speed up the process.”

The hairs had darkened and coarsened over the years. Urchin watched as she crushed them into the medicine.

“Thank you, Urchin,” she said. “Now that’s all you can do.”

It was something, at least, and better than feeling helpless. He felt he had given part of himself for Sepia’s healing.

“Shall I at least row as far as the mists?” he urged. “Then as soon as she does get through—and she will, won’t she?—I’ll be there to meet her and bring her home.”

“No, Urchin, you may not,” said Crispin firmly, and there was something in his voice—sorrow and peace at the same time—that Urchin couldn’t understand. “I know that’s not what you want to hear, but you will be needed here before she gets back. If she does get through, the otters will be fighting for the chance to bring her boat in, and woodland animals would only be in the way. Go and see what Oakleaf’s doing, please.”

There was no point in arguing, but Urchin yearned to do something to help Sepia. He bowed and left reluctantly, knowing that the king probably wasn’t at all concerned about what Oakleaf was doing. It was just a considerate way of dismissing him. Oakleaf was doing what most of the young squirrels were doing, cleaning up the wreckage of the tower. Urchin went to the bay Fingal had told him of, where soft white swansdown lay in foamy drifts on the dark damp sand, and carried armfuls of the feathers up to the workrooms. Hedgehogs, struggling up the stairs with Threadings in their arms, stood to one side to let him through.

Sepia would either be home soon, or—he had to face the truth— she would be dead. If she lived, she would have the softest pillow the island could give her. Needle, repairing a damaged Threading, saw him coming.

“Any more news?” she asked. Urchin told her of the conversation with the queen, and about the medicine that could save Sepia’s life. “Then Crispin came in,” he said. “There’s something different about him.”

“There’s been something different about him for a long time,” said Needle.

“A new sort of different,” said Urchin, and Needle shrugged.

“I think it’s his old wound,” she said. “He doesn’t want anyone to see that it hurts.”

“Everyone says that,” said Urchin irritably. “It’s more than that. He makes me uneasy.”

“Well, you’re making me uneasy, so stop it,” snapped Needle. “What are those feathers for?”

“Can you make a pillow?” he asked. “Or—it might be better—help me to make one?”

Needle stretched up to a shelf, pulled down a length of soft white cotton, and unfurled it so that it floated in the air before settling on her

table. “That’ll do to make a pillowcase,” she said. “We’ve got some lace I can put around it.”

“That’ll be wonderful,” said Urchin.

“And I can put lavender in it,” said Needle. “It’s for Sepia, isn’t it? She’ll sleep better with lavender.”

“I’ll get it,” he said. “There’ll still be some in Juniper’s window boxes.” Sepia might die, but he needed to behave as if she’d live. He ran up to Juniper’s tower. But he heard voices—Juniper’s and the king’s—so he ran back down again. He mustn’t interrupt them.

Crispin sat where he had so often sat before, opposite Juniper, on a low stool in the priest’s chamber, which had hardly changed since Brother Fir’s time. It was still simply furnished, clean and airy, with logs in the hearth and a saucepan for heating cordials. A shawl that had belonged to Juniper’s foster mother, Damson, lay across the bed. Crispin held a cup of berry cordial in his paws, and was turning it around and around. He was taking in every detail of the chamber, as he did with so many things these days.

“The queen believes that Sepia can’t hold out much longer against the effects of the poison,” he said. “It’s only what Corr and Crown are doing that can keep her alive, and they might not be able to keep her going until it’s ready—and it certainly won’t be ready today. The water, honey, and mendingmoss are just helping her to hold on to life, but they can’t make her better. What we really need is to get her through the mists. As soon as possible isn’t enough. It has to be sooner than possible.”

“And if we can’t?” said Juniper.

“We could put the medicine in a bottle and give it to Corr to take to her. But the medicine isn’t enough. She’s so weak that she’ll need good nursing care for a long time afterward. She’ll need warmth, rest, good feeding, and ideally, Cedar. We have to get her home. I thought of a way, but it doesn’t seem to fit.”

Juniper’s gaze rested on the velvet bag still around Crispin’s neck.

“Are you thinking of the Heartstone?” he asked.

“I’m trying *not* to think of the Heartstone,” admitted Crispin. “Let’s look at the facts. Husk tried to get rid of it by sending it away, but it kept returning to Mistmantle until it returned forever. When it finally did come home, you, Urchin, Cedar, and Lugg came with it. The Heartstone brought you through the mists. It could bring Sepia, too. But it’s not that simple, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” said Juniper. “The Heartstone is far deeper and more complex that any of us can ever know.”

“I couldn’t help wondering,” said Crispin thoughtfully, “if we kept the Heartstone in its bag so that Corr could take it, he could row the boat home with her in it, and put it around her neck, so that she’d get through. Simple. But it’s as if there’s something I’m not seeing.”

“Oh, yes,” said Juniper as if he were talking to the empty grate. “There is.” He looked up into the king’s eyes. “It’s the Heartstone, Your Majesty, not a magnet. Sepia once came to me to tell me about something she’d done. It’s not something I’d normally tell you, but in the circumstances, and in the strictest confidence, I will. That night when she rescued Catkin, she came up here intending to take the Heartstone so that she could be sure of getting them both back safely.”

“Sepia did that!” exclaimed Crispin.

“Yes, Sepia,” said Juniper. “She was afraid of being carried off through the mists and she knew that the Heartstone had brought Urchin and me home, so she thought it would do the same for her. But she never got a paw to it. Brother Fir woke up, and she told him what she meant to do. He was very understanding, the way he was about most things.”

“Yes,” said Crispin. “He would be. But it’s hard to believe that Sepia did that.”

“There you are,” said Juniper. “You know in your heart that it’s not an acceptable thing to do. Sepia had to learn that the Heartstone isn’t something we can use, or just pass from paw to paw. It’s not a magic charm or a tool to get us through the mists. We have to treat it with respect. It’s a gift, but a powerful one. We don’t have the right to make use of it.”

Crispin finished the cordial and put down the cup. His paw rested on the familiar shape of the sword hilt at his side, and it occurred to him that it

was a long time since he'd had a fencing match with Urchin. It would be good to do that again.

"If we can't use the Heartstone," he said, "I believe there may be one other way. There's something I haven't told you."

Then Juniper remembered the words of the prophecy. When he began to understand it, he thought his heart would break.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EPIA LAY CURLED UP IN THE BOAT, dreaming and crying out. In her dreams she saw her song cave, but the walls seemed to grow dark and close in on her. Shuddering convulsed her. Somebody slipped water into her mouth, and she coughed. She heard the sounds of battle, reliving a long-ago day of flashing swords and torn Threadings. There was a tall hedgehog with his paws around her throat—but now somebody was singing to her. She tasted honey, the sweetest honey with a taste of flowers and sunshine. Rain fell on her face, and somebody wrapped a cloak around her.

She dreamed of her friends, of the shore, and of singing. Then she was in another boat, with a wild-eyed squirrel springing at her—she screamed. The ravens were coming, the ravens that flew at her in her nightmares—somebody was saying her name. She wanted it to be Urchin, but knew that it wasn't.

Silver on the sea. She remembered, long ago, a track of silver across the sea. It had brought her home, but there was no trace of silver now. Pain, weakness, and the longing for home made her whimper.

★

Crown pulled the cloak around her to keep the rain from falling on her. That cloak had probably saved her, that and his own protecting wing. He tried to see through the mists, watching and listening for Corr to come back.

"Heart," whispered Sepia.

"Heart keep you," said Crown.

★

"Heart," prayed Urchin as he stood on the shore and looked out to the mists.

Heart, thought Needle, turning her face away, not wanting to cry on the pillow she was sewing for Sepia.

Heart, thought Princess Catkin as she pattered into Sepia's chamber with a soft white quilt and flowers, beause making Sepia's room ready helped her to believe that Sepia would sleep there again.

In the priest's tower, Juniper remembered something else from long ago. "Crispin," he said, "that night, when Sepia went out to Catkin's rescue—Brother Fir told her to trust the Heart, and not the Heartstone."

Trust the Heart and not the Heartstone.

"Thank you," answered Crispin. "I know what to do now."

The island was a beautiful place, an island of plenty for all—not just food, drink, and shelter, but love and work, happiness and strength—all the things that made every waking day good. The Heart had broken with love for Mistmantle, and more hearts would break for the island's future.

"We still have a day until the medicine is ready," said Juniper.

"I'll use it well," said Crispin. "Good night, Juniper. Thank you." He stopped to take a last look from Juniper's tower, marveling at the simple and everyday beauty of turf, sea thrift, rocks, sand, and sea. "I love Mistmantle so much."

Juniper decided that, as he wouldn't sleep, he might as well spend the night in prayer. All night, he lifted his heart to the Heart for Urchin, for Catkin, for Oakleaf, and little Almondflower. For Captain Padra, who had always been at Crispin's side. For Crispin and Cedar, who walked paw in paw along the shore, before turning back at last to the tower and the soft, cool pillows waiting for them. He prayed for Crown and Sepia in the little boat bobbing beyond the mists as cold and darkness fell, and there were tears on his face.

Urchin slept lightly that night in a boat near the jetty, wrapped in his cloak, ready to put to sea if he needed to. He slept at last, and woke to the feeling that, although the air was as quiet and still as only the early morning could be, there were other animals about.

He sat up, eased the crick in his neck, and looked around. Silently, the islanders were gathering to watch for Sepia. Lady Cott the mole, her daughters Wren, Wing, and Moth, and her grandchildren were huddled together outside a tunnel entrance. Sepia's family was there. Pitter and Scatter hugged each other for comfort. Padra and Tide watched. Needle and Scufflen gazed out to sea. A familiar tread behind him made him turn his head reluctantly from the long, unyielding sea and the mists. Apple was on her way with Hope.

"It's no good sitting there, Urchin," she said. "Won't bring her home, staring out at the sea." Hope climbed into the boat beside him. "She'll get back, don't you worry, I'll have some lovely cordial ready for her, it'll do her the power of good, I'll give it to the queen for her, didn't it help bring you around when you were ill? I had a proper good chat with her and King Crispin this morning."

"This morning?" repeated Urchin.

"They were up bright and early, the king and queen," she said. "Reckon they're having a little break. They were going up to Anemone Wood and having a little chat with folks on their way. Took a bit of a trip around the coast."

"He must be checking for storm damage," said Urchin—but that didn't make sense, because Crispin had already done all that.

"I have something to tell you, Urchin," said Hope. "The king says you're to go to the Gathering Chamber this afternoon at high tide."

"Did he say why?" asked Urchin.

"No," said Hope.

"And is the medicine…?"

"The queen says no, it isn't," said Hope, and squeezed Urchin's paw. "Sorry."

At high tide Urchin ran up to the Gathering Chamber. Even though his heart and mind were reaching out beyond the mists, the habits of behavior

remained. He smoothed his ear tufts and tail tip, adjusted his sword, and strode into the chamber.

He had never tried to understand how an occasion, or a place, could feel happy and solemn at the same time, but it was like that now, with the Gathering Chamber windows open and a breeze wafting the curtains. The chairs had been removed, and the Threadings hung at last in their places again as if there had been no storms and no floods. The door to the antechamber where ceremonial robes were kept stood open. Cedar, Catkin, and Oakleaf were there, the queen on her throne with Catkin and Oakleaf sitting at her feet, and Padra, Arran, and Fingal behind her. Docken stood by the window with Thripple, Hope, and Hope's little sister Mopple, and Needle was near them. Spade the mole, Moth, Juniper—why were all his old friends here? Was it a meeting of the Circle? And as he wondered, the king emerged from the anteroom with such a light in his eyes and such a buoyancy in his step that he reminded Urchin of the Captain Crispin of long ago. It was only seeing Crispin looking so young that made him realize how much older he'd grown since he had become king, and, most of all, since the war against the ravens. Urchin bowed. This was his hero.

"Urchin," said the king, "there's something we haven't done in ages, and we should do it today. One good fencing bout!"

"Your Majesty?" said Urchin. It was out of place, having a bit of fun, fencing, when Sepia might be dying. Was the king trying to take their minds off it? But he had learned that the king's actions always had a reason, and if he'd feel better for a match, he was welcome to it.

"It's an order, Urchin," said Crispin, and threw his cloak to Oakleaf. "And so is this—don't hold back!"

"No, Your Majesty," said Urchin.

"I mean it," said the king, his smile radiant. "I'll know if you're letting me win. Ready? Padra, will you measure the ground?"

Padra took a leaf from a bowl beside the throne, laid it in the center of the floor, and walked five paces from it toward the anteroom. "So neither of you will have the sun in your eyes," he said. "Your Majesty—Crispin—here." He took five paces in the other direction. "Urchin, here."

With a swish of steel, they drew, raised their swords, and kissed the blades.

“For Mistmantle!” declared Crispin.

“For Sepia of the Songs!” said Urchin, and Padra clapped his paws.

In spite of what Crispin had said, Urchin couldn’t hurl himself straight into the fight against his king, with the result that he was very nearly disarmed in the first few strokes. Crispin’s swordplay was as swift and sure as ever, and Urchin found he had to duck, fall, get up again. Then he threw all his strength and skill into the bout, because the king deserved the best opponent he could be. He made every stroke count, anticipating every move, forcing errors from the king before being pushed back himself toward the wall—he was enjoying it now. Blades clashed and rang, Urchin and Crispin leaped and twirled on and off the dais until they were nearly on the windowsill. For half a second, Urchin saw the chance to spin the sword out of Crispin’s paw, but in that heartbeat he hesitated. Then his own sword flew from his paw so suddenly that he didn’t know how it had happened. The king, out of breath, was embracing him, patting him on the back as all the animals applauded.

“Well done, both of you!” cried the queen.

“There’s nothing to choose between you,” said Padra. “It could have gone either way. Mopple, help me serve the drinks.”

Wine and cordials were offered around. Urchin heard Crispin’s voice in his ear.

“Be strong, Urchin,” whispered the king. “You must be very, very strong now.”

In the time it took Urchin to accept the drink Mopple held out to him, Crispin disappeared. Urchin caught a glimpse of him slipping into the anteroom, and would have followed him, but Padra drew him aside.

“Stay here, Urchin,” said Padra. He looked very pleased about something.

“But, Padra…” began Urchin as Hope, Catkin, and Needle all seemed to have disappeared into the anteroom, too. It was as if they were all playing a party game, and he was the only one who didn’t know the rules.

“Don’t ask,” said Padra.

In the antechamber, Needle and Crispin lifted one robe after another from the chest.

“There was a lovely yellow-gold cloak that Sepia was making for him,” whispered Needle. “I was helping her with the tricky bits, and it’s nowhere to be seen. I’ve looked everywhere, I don’t understand it, and it’s really annoying. It would have been perfect for today. I suppose it’s been put in the wrong place.”

“We can manage without it,” said Crispin, still rummaging through the robes. “Look, here’s my old captain’s robe! Do you think he’d like to wear that?”

“He’d be delighted, Your Majesty,” said Needle. “May I see?”

She took the robe from the king’s paws. She had expected to find it crumpled, but the robes had been laid down carefully, and it fell as smoothly as if it had been freshly aired and brushed. The embroidery around the collar and hem was as bright as ever.

Urchin didn’t always wear the traditional squirrel green. It didn’t suit his pale fur as well as it did the rich, dark red of the other squirrels. But Needle knew he wouldn’t mind that. The idea of wearing Crispin’s robe would be wonderful to him.

Urchin was still wondering what was going on, and why Padra was keeping him talking. He was even more bewildered when the queen said, “Excuse me, Urchin,” and began to smooth down his ear tufts and tail tip as if she were making him presentable for a formal occasion. Longpaw the messenger suddenly jumped in through the window, and when there was a firm step outside in the corridor, Docken opened the door to admit Apple and her husband, Filbert, both wheezing as they got their breath back.

“Apple?” said Urchin. Apple wore a shawl Needle had made for her, and her hat with the pink rosebuds. Urchin wanted to ask her what was happening, but she spoke first.

“I don’t know what I come here for,” she announced, which only added to his confusion. “Longpaw said we were to come and it were something special, so I got me ’at and we come at once, I hope we haven’t kept anyone waiting, ooh, look, here’s the king, and the queen, ooh!”

Urchin turned to bow to the king and saw that Crispin was transformed. He wore the oakleaf crown, and an embroidered robe swished about him as he walked. At his side, Cedar, in her robes and crown, had never looked more like a queen.

Padra led Urchin to a point just a few steps from the dais. “Kneel, Urchin,” he ordered.

Urchin began to make sense of what was happening, except it couldn’t be happening at all. But when Padra, Docken, and Arran all slipped into the antechamber and returned in their robes, things seemed to be falling into place. Everyone was smiling. The king stood up.

“Urchin of the Riding Stars,” he began, “son of the esteemed Almond of Ashfire and brave Brother Candle of Whitewings, foster son of loyal Apple, you have served this island and its creatures well. You sought me in exile and helped me to come home. You delivered the island of Whitewings, and brought down their tyrant. You took part in the rescue of Princess Catkin in her infancy, worked and struggled to save the islanders in the landslide, and fought in the Raven War. You have shown courage, wisdom, love, and loyalty. You have been a good friend and a bright spirit. We know your qualities, and your persistence in seeing all things through to the end. Needle, does he know the Threadings Code?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Needle. It hadn’t been easy, but she’d taught it to him.

“Whittle,” asked the king, “does he know the history and law of the island as thoroughly as he needs to?”

“Er—yes, Your Majesty,” said Whittle.

“Then, Urchin of the Riding Stars,” proclaimed Crispin, “it is my will and the will of Queen Cedar, Catkin the Heir of Mistmantle, our worthy captains, and the Circle that you be appointed and blessed as a captain of Mistmantle.”

Urchin felt the gasp inside himself, and could not speak. There was a little cry of delight from Apple, cut short as she clapped her paws over her mouth.

“Urchin of the Riding Stars,” Crispin went on, “will you, all your life, raise your heart to the Heart?”

Urchin found he had to breathe slowly and deeply. He wanted to breathe this moment into himself and keep it forever.

“With the Heart’s help, I will, Your Majesty,” he said.

“Will you live, serve, guide, and help the animals of Mistmantle, putting their needs before your own?”

“Yes, with the Heart’s help, Your Majesty,” said Urchin.

“Will you be loyal to me and to my heirs and successors, so long as we abide within the Heart?”

“With the Heart’s help, I will, Your Majesty,” he said.

He must imprint every sound and every heartbeat into his memory. The wide joyful smile on Crispin’s face, the smiles he could feel rather than see, he must keep all this forever. The king’s oakleaf crown with the swan design. A butterfly on the window. Hope, holding a robe across his paws. Fingal with something covered on a cushion.

“Give me your sword and sword belt, Urchin,” said the king.

Urchin unbuckled his sword, finding that his paws were trembling and clumsy. The sword looked plain, worn, and shabby as he laid it before the king.

Padra stepped forward, and for the first time Urchin saw the sword and sword belt he carried in his paws. The hilt, as Padra fastened it around his waist, was plain and light, and the sword at his hip felt as perfectly balanced as if it were part of himself.

“Present your new sword to the king,” ordered Padra.

Urchin drew the sword, and the smooth, clean swish of the action was as if it sang. Holding it lightly by the blade, he presented the hilt over his arm to Crispin, who took it.

Juniper stepped forward to place both paws on Urchin’s head. It may have been the warmth of his paws or the power of the moment, but it seemed to Urchin that sunlight poured into him.

“Urchin of the Riding Stars, my brother,” he said, “live in the Heart in holiness. Serve the cause of justice. Love mercy. Value all animals as your equals. Always learn. Rejoice in every new day. Be a good captain and a good friend. Share the laughter and the tears of your fellow animals and may the Heart keep you, nurture you, strengthen you, instruct you, and claim you.”

Crispin kissed the sword blade. “For justice and freedom,” he said. “Urchin, take it and kiss the blade.”

Urchin did. The king folded his paws over Urchin’s, and Urchin didn’t know if this was part of the ceremony or just because the king could see his

paws were shaking.

“Sheathe your sword, Captain Urchin,” he said, “and use it only for what is right and good.”

Urchin slid the sword into the scabbard, and suddenly everything seemed lighter and less solemn than it had before—Crispin, the queen, and all the faces he could see looked wonderfully happy. The king’s tone was lighter.

“I have to dress you in my old clothes today,” he was saying. “I’m sorry about that, Urchin.” He lifted the robe from Hope’s paws. “And I will robe you myself.”

Urchin’s eyes widened as Crispin shook out the robe. He wanted to put out a paw and touch it. He remembered the great honor he had felt as a page, when he had helped Padra to robe. Now he was being robed himself, with Crispin, his king and his hero, settling the robe on his shoulders and arranging it around him. He only hoped that he would live up to his title. He didn’t feel fit to wear Crispin’s robe, but he couldn’t very well argue with him about it.

“Now, Urchin,” went on the king, “long ago, in dark times, you, Lugg, and Arran made sure I had my circlet to take with me into exile.” Urchin realized what was coming next, and his heart beat hard and fast. “I gave it to my Lady Whisper on our marriage, and she was wearing it when she died. I wanted to leave it on her grave, do you remember? And you urged me to bring it back.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said.

“Each captain’s circlet should be made new,” said Crispin, “but I’d like you to wear mine.”

Urchin’s doubts must have shown in his face, because Crispin put both paws on his shoulders.

“Don’t tell me you’re not worthy of it, Urchin,” he said. “It is my dear wish, and the queen’s, that you should wear this.”

Fingal lifted off the cover. Polished and gleaming, the perfect circle of gold lay on its cushion. Juniper lifted it in both paws, raised it high, and gave it to Crispin.

“Urchin of the Riding Stars,” said Crispin, “be a guardian of this island. Be strong, be true, be noble. Be Captain Urchin.”

The gold ring of the circlet pressed down into Urchin's fur, and it seemed to him that in that moment he changed forever. Then the king was hugging him and kissing him on both cheeks, the queen had left her throne to kiss him, the other captains were patting him on the back, and the smile on Needle's face was the brightest he had ever seen.

"I'd better not hug you," she said.

"Thanks," said Urchin, and was immediately wrapped in a hug from Apple, who was sobbing too much to speak.

"Catkin, Mistress Apple needs refreshment," said Crispin. "Forgive me, Apple, I'm neglecting you. Needle, send for wine!"

"We'll have to mind how we speak to Urchin now, Hope," said Fingal, grinning. Urchin sat down and put an arm across Hope's shoulders.

"Captain Urchin!" said Hope.

"Do you remember," said Urchin, "when we found our way out of those tunnels, when you were looking for Thripple?"

"I won't ever forget that," said Hope.

"That day," said Urchin, "you called me 'Master Urchin, sir.'"

"Did I?"

"Nobody had ever called me 'master' before, let alone 'sir,'" said Urchin. "It made me feel grown up, even though I knew that I wasn't."

"He still isn't," remarked Fingal. "Don't grow up, Urchin, whatever you do. Definitely a bad idea."

"Do we have to call you Captain Urchin all the time now?" asked Hope.

"Absolutely," said Fingal.

"Not if you don't want to," said Urchin. "I'll always be Urchin."

"And you should be very proud of it, too," sniffed Apple. "It were the king himself gave you your name, Urchin, when he weren't a captain yet, just Crispin."

"And I'm still just Crispin!" cried the king. "You are all forbidden to call me king today! Let's drink a toast, everyone. Does everyone have a drink? To Captain Urchin!"

And amid the toast and the congratulations that followed, nobody noticed the way Padra raised an eyebrow to the king, or the way King Crispin slipped to his side and said, “Bear with me, Padra. I need to hear my own name today.” But in the middle of it all, Urchin, drinking his wine and accepting everyone’s good wishes, wondered why this was happening now, of all times, and so unexpectedly. He knew there was something he had still not been told.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN THE BOAT BEYOND THE MISTS Crown moved, painfully, to turn and hold his one good wing over Sepia. He must keep the sun from burning her by day, just as he must keep her warm by night. He wished there was something he could say or do to make the mists part. He had begged the Heart to do something, something different, just for Sepia. He poured water into her dry mouth and drank some himself.

"Sepia," he said, "Corr has gone for help. Even now, they'll be planning something. He'll be back soon with medicines and food and everything you need. Your queen will know what to do. Just hold on, hold on, Sepia."

Cool water dripped into her mouth. Sepia tried to open her eyes and see who was helping her, but even that effort was too great. She supposed she must be dying slowly, because she had lost all sensation in her paws again. She no longer knew where they were. Her ears twitched a little, but she wasn't sure how.

Memories floated in and out of her dreams. She saw herself again, the youngest of a big family, small, and just the tiniest curl to her paw. There was a cave where she'd go all by herself to sing, and the sound would come back from the walls and the shimmering stones. There had been a furious dash through the forest to warn the king of treachery—or had she dreamed that? Catkin, Linty, a boat, and Urchin—where was Urchin?

Shadows fell. Evening came. She tried to curl up more tightly, and could not, because her limbs would not do what she wanted them to. Perhaps she was in the sea. Catkin and Linty had been in the boat; then she had fallen into the sea—no, that had all happened long ago. This was a different boat.

Crown spread the winter cloak over her, tucking it around her with his beak, and settling again with his wing over her, nestling his warmth against her. She smiled weakly.

“Thank you,” she whispered, but even that was so hard that it might be best never to speak again. The sea and the creeping of death told her not to. *Sleep*, said the sea, *sleep*, *Sepia*, said death. *No need to wake again.*

In Mistmantle Tower, Queen Cedar slipped away from the celebrations to the bedchamber where the glass bottle of medicine stood warming beside the hearth. She held it to a candle flame, shaking it gently. Then she held it up to the light, put it down, added another tuft of her own fur, and warmed it in her paws as if she could coax it to be ready more quickly. In the meantime, she’d busy herself with other things. Crispin would need her.

Among the animals gathered on the shore and those who were rebuilding their homes, and the tower animals putting their workrooms and kitchens to rights, the news spread that Urchin of the Riding Stars was now a captain. They welcomed the good news with cheers, dancing, and hats thrown in the air, even if they followed it with “oh, but poor Sepia…” But Urchin, still in the Gathering Chamber, felt awkward about appearing among the other animals with a circlet on his head. He felt he wanted someone to tell him how to be a captain, when from now on he’d have to get more used to giving orders than receiving them.

Apple and Filbert had left and it seemed as if the celebration was coming to an end. The other captains were taking off their robes, so Urchin took his off, too. If there hadn’t been other animals there, he would have pressed his cheek against it. Crispin took it from him.

“I was a page once,” he said. “I haven’t forgotten how to put a robe away. Now…”

Suddenly, his face was graver. Urchin felt that things were coming to a conclusion. Cedar and Juniper were standing together close to the king.

“Will you speak to everyone here?” Crispin asked them, and turned back to Urchin. “Urchin, Needle, Hope, please go to Juniper’s turret. Wait for me there.”

Urchin, Needle, and Hope climbed the stairs silently and huddled together in Juniper’s tower. They didn’t know what it was that Crispin had to tell them, but uneasiness made them nervous.

“He always knows what he’s doing, doesn’t he?” said Urchin.

“That doesn’t necessarily make it any better,” said Needle. They sat in awkward silence, and it was a relief to hear Crispin’s step on the stair. He smiled reassuringly as he sat down on a stool by the hearth, but his eyes were sad.

“Are you all right, sir?” asked Urchin.

“Yes, Urchin,” he said quietly, “and soon everything will be all right, even though it might not seem so immediately. What I have to tell you now is hard, very hard, but it’s also necessary and right. You may ask questions if you like, but wait until I’ve finished.”

They nodded, and waited.

“You know that I was badly injured in the Raven War,” he said. “You probably know that my old wound has always been with me. You don’t know how serious it was—for a while, nobody did. But the raven’s talon penetrated right to my heart, and damaged it. It’s time to tell you what only Cedar, Padra, and Juniper have known—my wife, my best friend, and our priest. I’m dying.”

No! The word formed in Urchin’s mouth, and he pressed his lips shut. He must not interrupt.

“There’s nothing to be done,” he said. “If it hadn’t been for Pitter and her mendingmoss, and Cedar’s care ever since, I’d have died long ago. But that injury is draining me now. I can only get weaker and slower.”

Urchin took Needle’s paw. He could tell she was biting her lip and wanted to cry. Hope shuffled to Crispin’s side and laid his head against the king’s paw.

“Thank you, Hope,” said Crispin, and stroked the hedgehog’s head. “You always know the right thing to do. Now, all of you, remember Juniper’s prophecy. *One must come and one must go, one must go and one will come. Sorrow before joy.* Juniper and I have talked about this. It’s about Sepia and me. Sepia can’t get back through the mists. I’ve been away twice, and we all know about going through a third time. It will probably kill me, but I’m dying anyway. And what I believe—and Juniper almost didn’t want to agree with me, but he knows it’s true—is that if I go, willingly, out of love for the island, there will be a perfect balance and Sepia can come home.”

Urchin wanted to cover his face with his paws, but he mustn't. He was a captain now. He had often thought he would give his own life to save Sepia, but this wasn't his own life.

"May I speak now?" he asked. Crispin nodded.

"I could go instead. I've left twice. I could die for Sepia."

Crispin smiled. "And what could I say to her, if she came back and found that you weren't here? It has to be me, and only me. I'm the king. It's my privilege and my responsibility. And remember what I just told you. I'm dying. Do you think I'd willingly leave Catkin to be queen when she's so young? Do you think I want to leave my family, especially when Almondflower's so little that she might not remember me? But this way, I won't grow feeble and take to my bed. They won't watch me turn old and grumpy. Urchin, Needle, Hope, I never expected to be king, but I've tried to be a good one."

"The best ever," said Needle. "And now you're giving your life for the island."

"No," said Urchin, and as the king's eyes met his, they knew that they understood each other perfectly. "You've already given your life for the island, every day. Now you're giving your death."

"It's all I have left to give," said Crispin. "And I want you to understand that if it only saved Sepia's life, it would be worth it. But it isn't just Sepia—it's all she will bring to the island, and all our future as an island. Juniper believes that there is great change coming, and it will be good. The Heart has a way of turning things around. *Sorrow before joy.* That's how it is. Urchin, you and I have both been forced to leave the island against our will in the past, but great good has come of it. If King Silverbirch hadn't tried to kill you, Cedar wouldn't have come here, and Whitewings would never have been liberated. It'll be all right this time, too—more than all right."

"It can't be all right if you die, sir," said Needle in a very small voice.

"It can only be all right if I die," said Crispin, and in spite of her sharp spines he hugged her. "If my life has counted for anything, I want my death to count for something, too."

He released her, and took Hope's paw. "Take care of these two for me, Hope," he said.

“Yes, sir,” said Hope.

“Urchin,” said Crispin, “you’ve had hardly any preparation for being a captain, but I know you’ll be a good one. Take good care of Catkin. Wear your circlet every day, and wear it well. Remember that sometimes it’s when we’re simply being ourselves that we make a difference. The most important thing I ever did—absolutely definitely without a doubt the most important—was pick up a half-drowned baby squirrel from the sea.”

He turned, and seemed to be watching the tide. Then he looked around once more at Juniper’s turret—the hearth, the cups, the basket of logs, the plain little bed, the open windows with the herbs and flowers spilling from the window boxes.

“Not long to go,” he said. “I should go down to Cedar and the children. Cedar and Juniper will have told the other senior animals by now. The Circle will let the rest of the island know, but only when I’ve gone, so nobody can try to make me come back. Oh, and, Urchin, one more thing. Now that you’re a captain, you’ll need my permission to marry.” He picked up a leaf, and scored his clawmark through it. “You do want to marry Sepia, don’t you?”

Urchin felt his face blush. He wished nobody else had been there.

“I was going to ask her,” he said. “I wish I’d asked her before the rage tide. She might say no.”

Crispin laughed. “I shouldn’t worry about that,” he said. “I know Sepia, and I know she’ll have you, Urchin.”

“If she lives,” whispered Urchin. “Sir, if you go, she’ll get back—but that doesn’t mean that she’ll live, does it?”

“No, but it gives her a chance,” said the king. “And if she dies, at least she’ll die at home, with the animals she loves. She has a strong spirit, and she’ll have all the care Cedar can give her.” He put the leaf into Urchin’s paw. “There’s my token. Permission to marry her, Urchin. And, Hope, what would we do without you?” He snatched up another leaf, scored it, and gave it to Urchin. “Hope of the Circle! Get him admitted! See to it, Captain Urchin!” He shook Hope’s paw and Needle’s, seized Urchin in a strong hug that Urchin would feel forever, then leaped from the window and disappeared down the wall.

“Let him go, Urchin,” said Needle as she put her arm around Hope.

Eager to check on Crown and Sepia, Corr crept from the castle before sunrise and began the long swim to their boat. After several hours, and weary with swimming, Corr reached the little craft and flopped into it. Crown raised his head. Corr saw his red-rimmed eyes and grief overwhelmed him.

"She's still alive," croaked Crown.

"And you," said Corr, "you look—"

"Terrible," said Crown, "I know. I haven't slept. I haven't dared fall asleep."

"I'll take over," said Corr. "I've brought Spring Gate water." He opened the sealed flask of spring water that hung around his neck, and raised Sepia's head. Her face was thinner than ever. Her eyes barely flickered open.

"Drink this, Sepia," he said. "Spring Gate water. Everyone sends their love. Urchin, the king and queen, Cedar, everyone. Longpaw and all your family. Can you hear me, Sepia? Brother Juniper and Needle, and your choir, all your little choir. They're looking forward to you coming home, Sepia. They've been practicing their songs for you."

Crown had already fallen asleep. Corr found the pot of honey, dipped a claw in it, and stroked it onto her tongue.

"Honey from the Queen of Whitewings," he said. "It's making you well. Think of Urchin."

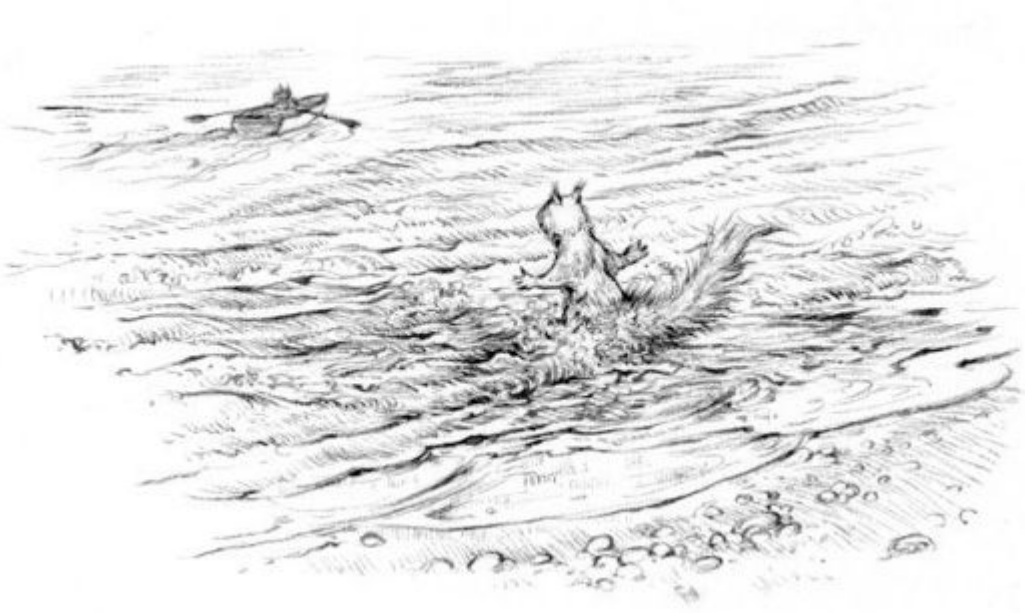
Against the kind welcome of death, Sepia felt something was calling her back. The flowery sweetness of honey was on her tongue again. It tasted of everything she loved about summer. One by one, notes of music played in her head. *Summer, honey, Mistmantle, music, Urchin…*it was as if they were fighting death over her.

Evening gathered around Mistmantle. Urchin, not knowing where to go or what to do, paced the tower from Juniper's turret to the Spring Gate. It was

no good. He couldn’t just let Crispin go and never see him again. He had no idea which way to go, but the watchers on the shore were still gazing out for any trace of Sepia, so of course Crispin wouldn’t have left the island that way, where the crowds were. His tail flying out behind him, Urchin turned and dashed the other way.

Juniper and Padra were walking slowly toward him. In the fading light their faces were unclear, but their slow walk and bowed heads were enough to tell Urchin what he needed to know. Breathlessly, he stopped in front of them. The bag containing the Heartstone hung around Juniper’s neck.

“He’s gone, Urchin,” said Padra, and caught Urchin’s paw before he could rush to the sea. “Don’t try to stop him.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HAVE TO GO TO HIM," said Urchin. "I must. I won't try to stop him."

He ran along the shore, watching the darkening sea. There were lights on the boat. Realizing that he didn't know what to say and that it didn't matter, he waded out and swam.

In the long, steady twilight of his journey to the mists, the sea gentle and the waves glossy with moonlight, Crispin heard the far cry.

"My king! Crispin! My king!"

Crispin shipped the oars and waited, leaning forward in the boat as the bobbing head, dark with water, came nearer. He stretched forward as Urchin's paws reached up to the bow.

"Don't capsize me, Urchin," he said, and smiled.

"I won't," said Urchin, gasping with the effort of the swim.

"You can't come with me," said Crispin. "You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know," said Urchin. "But I had to see you again, to tell you that I understand what you're doing—or, at least, as far as any of us can. And maybe you wanted to go away without being thanked, but you can't. I need to thank you—for my life and my name, and for all you've done. For all you've been. For the king you've been. And for Sepia."

"Thank *you*, Urchin of the Riding Stars," said Crispin. "Thank you for your company, especially now. Urchin, you remember Whisper?"

"Of course I remember her, sir!"

"Good. Keep remembering her. Urchin, I believe that Sepia will come back, and I hope that she'll survive. But if she doesn't, you have to know that you can live without her. I had to live without Whisper, and you can

live without Sepia, if you have to. It won't be easy, but you can. I hope you don't have to. You were the only one from Mistmantle who ever met Whisper, so please, for my sake, remember my Lady Whisper."

"I will, Your Majesty. Always," he said, and realized that there was nothing more to say. It was time to turn around and swim back to shore. Delaying the moment would be like breaking the rhythm of a dance.

"Heart keep you forever, my king," he said.

"Heart keep you forever, Urchin of the Riding Stars," said Crispin, and Urchin swam to shore, pushing hard against the tide, not looking back until he had waded shivering to the sand, and the lights on the small boat had disappeared altogether.

Juniper wrapped a cloak around him.

"Get warm and dry," he said. "He'll be all right."

"I know," said Urchin.

Night fell around Sepia's boat as it waited beyond the mists. Corr tried to stay awake, but found himself slipping in and out of dreams. In them, he was safe and warm in his rooms at the Spring Gate. Sepia was running across the sands, or waving from a tower window—all was well. Then he would jerk awake and know that he was still on the sea, still beyond the mists, and still becalmed, far from home. He would listen for Sepia's breathing, open the bottle of Spring Gate water to drip a little into her mouth, and tuck the cloak around her, hugging her for warmth. He thanked the Heart for that cloak.

"Corr!" whispered Crown.

Corr realized he had been dreaming again. He sat up, felt for Sepia's pulse, and listened again to her breathing.

"Did you see it?" asked Crown.

"See what?" His eyes still wanted to close.

"Something silver," said Crown. "It moved in the mists. No—sorry—it's gone now. You go back to sleep. I'll watch her."

Crispin rowed steadily on, thinking of the first time he had rowed a small boat through those drifting white wreaths, and how bleak and wretched everything had seemed. At the thought of all that had happened since, how much and how good it had been, he was astonished. He could not have imagined such wonderful years. Every dip and swish of the oars in the quiet night water took him deeper into the mists, and with every stroke he knew that what he was doing was the right thing, the only thing to do; and his heart became more and more at one with the Heart that made him.

Stroke by stroke, with each creak and splash, the mists grew denser around him. He could see nothing else.

Feeling rested at last, Corr woke and found he could stay awake. He decided he might as well try rowing again. The sky was just a little lighter, and the tide would soon turn, so, with a yawn, he stretched the stiffness from his arms and took up the oars. Crown spread a wing over Sepia, to keep her warm.

“How’s your other wing?” asked Corr.

“I think it’s mending,” said Crown. “It doesn’t hurt so much now, I think the moss helped. I’ll see if I can fly a little today.” He extended the wing, then gasped.

“Did that hurt?” asked Corr.

“Corr!” cried Crown. “We’re moving! We’re going into the mists!”

Juniper, leaving Urchin, would have climbed up to his turret, but he saw the glimmer of a light behind the windows. Hope must be there. That was good. Somebody should be there just now, and his own heart was restless. The Chamber of Candles seemed to call him. It would still be dark and damp from flooding, but it was the right place to be. With a lantern and a basket

of candles he hurried alone through the tunnels with his lopsided limp, as Brother Fir had done long before, glad of his cloak, for these tunnels were damp. He opened the Chamber of Candles.

He felt the change in the air as soon as he opened the door. The chamber was warmer, drier, and cleaner than he could possibly have expected. He couldn’t explain it, and didn’t try.

He walked slowly to the center of the room and raised the lantern. Every candle had been cleared away before the rage tide had struck, and the room was now bare. He limped steadily around the chamber, setting out candles on ledges and on the floor as they had always been; white candles, cream candles, tapering candles, wide, round candles, and from the lantern he kindled a taper. One after another the candles flickered, faltered into weak blue lights against the dimness, and grew strong. He moved to the next, and the next, from ledge to floor to ledge again. At last, he blew out the taper and knelt.

He stayed in deep silence, his back straight, his paws turned palm upward, his eyes closed. The candle flames rose and grew stronger. When he opened his eyes, their power surprised him.

A little before dawn, light blazed into the chamber. Juniper shielded his eyes, but the light struck into his heart and mind. He knew that it had always been there, but he had never truly seen it until now, when it had been set free and become, for a few seconds, wonderfully and terrifyingly visible.

Instinct led him from the tower, and he had no need to call the other animals to follow him. They simply did, running to the shore, raising their faces to the sky.

“Stars!” said Crispin. His heart lifted high with joy. One more night of riding stars! The mists were thinner now, and soon he would see the wide sea and sky beyond them. The tide had not yet turned. He felt his heart beating faster, and reassured himself that there was nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to be lost. Now the mists were only light fingers of cloud around him. He rowed on until there was no need to row. For the third time in his

life he had passed beyond the mists, and dawn was tracing pale gold in a waking sky, gilding the waves.

He tried to stand in the boat, but the pain of his old wound ripped through him so suddenly that he fell and caught his breath. At last, a little unsteadily, he rose, turning to face the mists, knowing that the island he would never see again lay beyond them.

A single star twirled, danced, swooped, and spun so close to him that he might have touched it. Where did that brightness in the sky come from? Was it in the mists? Was it sunrise? And as he watched the mists, rising and swirling, a joy grew in him so strong that it spread from his heart to his limbs, his paws, his head. It shone in his eyes, filled his lungs, and exploded into stars. One last pain tore his heart before joy overwhelmed him and he reached out his paws.

“It’s you!” he cried, and fell.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

T’S RAINING STARS!” cried Crown, but on this night of riding stars they were not simply dancing across the sky. They were flying, soaring, and swooping; so many of them that it seemed not a single star could have stayed in its orbit. It was like a salute.

Corr rowed on. Every stroke of the oars brought him nearer to Mistmantle. At any time the boat might stop, but they had come this far. Something had happened. Something had changed, something so solemn and powerful that he barely dared to speak, and it was Crown who whispered to Sepia, telling her that they were nearly home, that the queen would look after her.

“And the stars!” he said. “If I could fly now, I’d fly among them! It’s like a dance! Sepia, can you open your eyes? The stars are dancing for you!”

Every animal on the shore was on its knees. They watched the sky and the sea. Urchin and Juniper, captain and priest, knelt side by side. Urchin had taken off his circlet. Catkin, her eyes pink and welling with tears, came to hold paws with both of them.

“Where’s Queen Cedar?” asked Urchin.

“She wants to be left alone,” said Catkin.

Urchin nodded. He could understand that.

“May I join you?” said Padra, coming to kneel beside them.

In all his life, Urchin had never thought of Padra as someone who needed looking after. Padra had always been the one to give encouragement and reassurance. But now, in this moment, he could feel the heaviness of his old captain’s heart, and put a paw on his shoulder. A star above them spun wildly, stopped for a second, and shattered in the sky, and Urchin felt it like the breaking of his own heart. Catkin hid her face, and Juniper put an arm around her.

“You were born on such a night as this, Urchin,” said Padra. “And on such a night as this, we faced the worst that Husk could do.”

“On a night like this,” said Urchin, “the Heartstone brought us home—Juniper and me, and Lugg. And it brought Cedar to us.”

“On a night like this,” said Juniper, “you were rescued, Catkin, and the stars fought for us against the ravens.”

“There has never been a night like this,” said Catkin quietly, and turned her face against Juniper’s shoulder.

A figure was walking slowly along the shore toward them. With nothing being said, they all saw him at the same time.

Urchin felt his heart had stopped. He could not move, and hardly breathed. From the soft gasps and sudden stillness of Juniper and Padra, he knew that they felt the same—then Juniper said quietly, “It’s Oakleaf,” and Catkin ran to hug her brother.

“I’d never realized he was so like Crispin,” said Urchin.

“I don’t think any of us did,” said Padra. “The island will be all right, with those two and Cedar.”

“The islanders will need to be told,” said Urchin. “I mean, about Crispin.”

“It has to be Cedar’s decision,” said Padra. “The family need time to sort themselves out before we tell the rest of the island, and she’ll choose the right moment.”

More animals came to join them. The tower was behind them, and all Urchin could see was sand, sea, the far-off mists, and the sky growing a little lighter all the time.

Among the animals, the whisper spread: *—It’s Urchin, have you heard, they made him a captain, yes, a captain! —Are you sure? He isn’t wearing a circlet…oh, yes, there it is, he’s holding it in his paws. Won’t it look good on that pale fur? Captain Urchin!*

Shyly watching him, they saw a new confidence in Urchin. As he looked up to observe the sky they saw him as an animal in command with an air of authority about him. But Urchin was looking up at the rising of the sun and wishing he could slow it down, and freeze the moment until Queen Cedar’s medicine was ready. He closed his paw around the bracelet and

thought of his mother and father, hoping that, if Sepia died, they would welcome her to whatever lay beyond. But it seemed too harsh, if he must face the future without parents, without Crispin, and without Sepia.

Heart help her, he thought, and closed his eyes. *Heart have mercy. Bring her home. Let her live.*

Perhaps he shouldn't ask that. Perhaps the Heart knew better.

If she has to die, let her die peacefully, without pain, and help me to live without her. But please let her live.

Padra touched his shoulder. "Urchin," he said, "there's something moving in the mists."

He opened his eyes and leaned forward. The shape, ghostly at first in the misty distance, emerged clearly through the mists. It was a boat, a small Mistmantle rowing boat with an animal heaving at the oars. He barely breathed.

Fingal, Tide, and Swanfeather were already in the sea. Padra followed them. Urchin leaped up and ran.

"We need ropes!" yelled Fingal. Urchin and Longpaw flew to the Spring Gate, but it seemed that a thousand paws were there with them, dragging out coils of rope to throw to the otters. Catkin stood ankle deep in the sea, calling out instructions before turning suddenly to run toward the tower. Dawn was spreading over the sky, but still stars skimmed across sea and lifted again to the sky. All around Urchin voices rose—Sepia's family, the choir she had taught, Apple, Crackle, Tide and Swanfeather, Hope, all calling her name, *Sepia! Sepia!*

"Heart bring her home!" cried Urchin. "Heart let her live!"

Standing in the water, he strained to see the otters as they reached Sepia's boat, fastened their ropes to it, and swam. With all their speed and strength, more otters swam out to join them. Suddenly the boat was nearer, it was skimming through the waves—Corr was rowing, Crown stood with his wings spread. Then the singing started.

"Well done, Corr!" shouted Urchin. "Well done!"

Catkin had gathered the choir. They sang at their sweetest and best, every note shaped and offered, singing Sepia home until tears blurred Urchin's eyes. Though the sun had risen, the stars still rained and danced.

There was no more need for Corr to row. The tide and the otters brought the boat rushing to the shore. He stood up in the bow, held up an oar in salute, then laid it down in the boat and sprang into the sea.

Urchin rubbed his eyes with the back of his paw and ran to the jetty, hardly noticing how the crowds parted to let him through. Corr reached the jetty as Urchin knelt, reached down, and pulled him dripping from the water.

"Well done, best of Voyagers," said Urchin as he clasped Corr in his arms. "Brave, true Corr."

"She's alive, sir," gasped Corr, though the cheers of the animals nearly drowned out his voice, "but only just. We did our best, sir."

"You did more than your best," said Urchin, and turned to hold up his paws to silence the crowds.

"Let her hear the choir!" he called, so the animals were silent while the sea and the choir sang Sepia to the shore, and every beat of Urchin's heart was a prayer until the boat was almost at the jetty. He sprang in beside her and knelt. Crown lifted a protecting wing.

Urchin gasped. Beneath the great soft wing lay the limp, tiny figure of a squirrel, her face gaunt and sunken, her paw in her mouth.

"Sepia!" he whispered. He slipped an arm behind her shoulders and raised her, shocked and afraid to find how thin she had become. Taking her paw, he felt the framework of frail bones that could snap like twigs. In spite of all that Corr and Crown could do, she felt frozen to his touch. He forced himself to keep hoping, but how could anyone so frail grow strong again?

"Sepia," he said again, "can you hear me? I've got you. You're home now. You're going to be well. You're back among your friends, and we can heal you. You're going to be all right, Sepia."

He looked up, noticing for the first time that Crown's other wing was limp, his face hollow with exhaustion, and his feathers rough. He, too, had suffered for Sepia.

"Thank you, Crown," said Urchin, and the swan bowed his head.

The crowds on the jetty were parting. Urchin turned to see that they were moving aside to make room for the queen as she ran through, a basket on her arm and a quilt in her paws.

“Get her onto the jetty, Urchin!” she called.

The boat glided into its place by the jetty and the keen, quick otters tied it with ropes. Urchin wrapped the yellow-gold cloak around Sepia and, as he lifted her, was terrified to find how light she was. Then he stepped from the boat, facing the tower with Sepia limp in his arms, as all around them the stars still fell into the sea and the choir sang, and it seemed to Urchin that this was the moment he had been born for. He laid her down at the queen’s paws.

“Give them room!” ordered the queen. She wrapped the quilt tightly around Sepia, putting her paw to Sepia’s head and her limbs, looking into her eyes, feeling for a pulse. She unstoppered a bottle and forced it into her mouth.

“Is that the medicine?” asked Urchin.

“No, that isn’t ready yet,” whispered the queen, still looking into Sepia’s face. “But this may keep her alive until it is.” She raised her voice. “Stay with us Sepia,” she said. “You have to, you don’t have a choice. Stay with us.” She looked up at the crowd. “All of you, look after Corr and Crown! Now, Urchin, quickly!” And she ran ahead of Urchin to the tower.

Animals were already gathered around Corr and Crown, congratulating them, asking them questions, and hurrying them back to the tower. Padra and Fingal seemed to be quietly taking over there. And still the stars fell and the choir sang, as Urchin carried Sepia home at last.

Needle, watching from the tower, turned and dashed to the workrooms where the newly finished swansdown pillow lay by itself on a table. She snatched it up, struggling to get her arms around it, and ran to Sepia’s chamber, where she found the queen there already, feeding wood to the fire in the grate, while mole maids poured steaming water into a bath. Needle had only just laid the white, scented pillow on the soft bed when the door swung open.

Urchin carried Sepia in, let the damp, grubby cloak fall to the floor, and laid her gently down, turning her hollow cheek against the soft cotton. He knelt beside her, holding her paw.

“Let me see her,” said Cedar, bending over Sepia. Urchin watched the queen, but there was no expression in her eyes.

“We have to wait until noonday to give her the antidote,” she said finally. “It’s settling and clearing now, but it isn’t ready yet. We have to keep her alive for the next few hours, and that means getting her warm. Hot bath with lavender, then dry her by the fire and put her to bed. We’ll try to get some drinks into her.”

Needle was staring at the cloak as the queen and the maids carried Sepia to her bath. “That’s your cloak, Urchin,” she said.

“No, it isn’t,” said Urchin. The cloak was the last thing he cared about. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“Of course you haven’t,” she said. She smoothed it down, frowning at the stains of seawater and the frayed hem. “You weren’t meant to. It was a surprise. Sepia was making it for you.”

“Sepia was?” He reached out to hold it again. “For me?”

“Who else would?” snapped Needle. “She needed help with it, so it was in my workroom. I’ve been wondering all this time where it had gone. Corr must have taken it when he went to find her. I wish he’d asked me first.”

“I suppose he just went to find a cloak and grabbed the nearest one,” said Urchin.

“He grabbed the best cloak in the island,” said Needle. “She even had it lined.” She stroked the cloak fondly. It was good to feel that her work had been a part of saving Sepia, even though Sepia had done most of the sewing herself. “It might have made all the difference. I’d better sort out that hem for you, but I’m not sure if we can do anything about the stains. Thripple might know.”

The queen lifted Sepia from the bath and carried her to the fire to dry her, wrapping her in the towel as if she were a baby. “Stay with me, Sepia,” she said, rubbing the thin limbs in the soft white towel—gently enough, though Urchin was afraid that Sepia’s wrists would break. “Don’t give up. Keep fighting.”

“Here’s Juniper,” said Needle. Juniper limped in to bend over Sepia, and gave the queen a look of question.

“She’s going to get better,” said the queen firmly, though Sepia’s eyelids had not even flickered. “She’s home.”

When Sepia was dry, Needle plumped up the swansdown pillow on the bed. Urchin lifted her onto it, and when the queen and Needle had laid the quilt softly over her and left, he took her paw and sat beside her, talking to her. He told her that all was well on the island now, that the tower was safe, that Mossberry could do no more harm, and that her family was well, Twirl was safe, her choir was still singing for her. He told her of summer, with honeysuckle climbing up the tower walls, and fruit ripening on the trees, and of the party they would have to celebrate her homecoming.

There was a tapping at the door. A mole maid opened the door shyly.

“May Master Hope come in, Captain Urchin, sir?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” said Urchin.

Hope trundled in. His eyes were moist, and he carried a few spring flowers.

“I just wanted to see her, sir,” he said.

Urchin turned his face away, feeling the sting of tears behind his eyes. He knew that Hope could barely see Sepia at all, but only wanted to be near her. He placed Hope’s paw in hers and knew that Hope, pressing his cheek against the thin paw, was as happy and contented as any animal on the island could be now.

“She’s here, sir,” said Hope, and sighed happily.

Sepia had dreamed of Mistmantle, over and over. In her dreams she had been safe in the tower, warm and fed. The king and queen had been there, and Urchin, and her friends. But every time she had woken, she was cold, hungry, thirsty, or in pain, with yet more uncaring sea around her and an open sky. This might be another dream, but it was a vivid dream full of kindness and the voices she loved best. She could taste cool water with a touch of apple in it. She hadn’t tasted that in her dreams before. She found she was lying on something soft as a cloud, smooth and cool, and a quilt settled softly over her.

Then she knew that she was falling asleep, and if she was falling asleep now, she could not have been dreaming before. It was real, then, and she didn’t want to sleep. She wanted to lie awake, feeling the loveliness of

the clean, soft bed. She tried to open her eyes and see if this time, it was really Urchin—but it was still too difficult.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ATKIN SAT ON THE TOP STAIR outside Juniper's turret, her chin on her paws. She heard a step on the stair, but it wasn't Juniper—you could always tell Juniper by his limp. As the patter of paws drew nearer, she recognized that it was her brother, Oakleaf.

"You, too?" he said.

"I wanted to see Juniper," she said. "I suppose he won't be long."

"I'll wait with you," said Oakleaf. "And I'm sure he won't mind if we wait inside. We can put some drinks on to heat. Would you like that?"

Juniper returned to his turret and was not surprised to find Catkin and Oakleaf there. They sat huddled side by side on the floor, their arms around each other, Catkin rocking a little in her brother's arms. Juniper stooped to add more water and elderberry juice to the saucepan on the hearth. Hot drinks could not heal sorrow, but they helped.

"You didn't know how ill he was, did you?" he said.

"Not until last night," said Catkin. "I knew about his injury in the war, but I suppose I just thought he could survive anything."

Juniper stirred the rich, dark cordials and held them out to Catkin and Oakleaf. Then he, too, sat down on the floor.

"He was always willing to give everything for the island," he said. "He'd already given his life. All he had left was his death. It wasn't just for Sepia. It was for our future, all of us, and whatever part she plays in it. There are changes already. Can you feel them?"

"I can't feel anything good just now," said Catkin miserably.

"I can," said Oakleaf. "It's as if somebody's opened a window, and everything's fresh, but it—it—I just can't believe that we'll never see Father again."

"I *don't* believe it," said Catkin fiercely. "I never will. We don't know what's happened to him! We don't, do we, Brother Juniper? It's the same as when Sepia was missing, and we held out hope for her! He might be adrift

on the sea, alone, and hungry.…” Her voice faltered. She took a pawful of rose petals from a bowl and wept into them. “I won’t be queen,” she sobbed. “Not until I know I have the right. How can I move into his place if he might still be alive?”

“There is a way of knowing,” said Juniper.

“He means the Heartstone, Catkin,” said Oakleaf. “If you can hold it, that’ll prove you’re the queen.”

“You mean, if I can hold it, that’ll prove he’s dead,” said Catkin. She crumpled the damp petals and reached for some more. “Would you want to find out that way, if it were you?”

“Drink your cordials and wait for me,” said Juniper. “I’ll ask Tide to stay with you.”

He limped down the stairs, sent a page to fetch Tide, and went to find the queen. She had left Sepia in the care of Urchin and the maids and gone to her chamber, where she was shaking a glass phial and holding it up to the light.

“Your Majesty,” he said gently.

She shaded her eyes against the sun before turning to him. Carefully, she placed the phial on a table.

“It’s been nearly a whole morning,” she said. “I’ve managed to live nearly a morning without Crispin.”

“Well done, Your Majesty,” said Juniper.

“But Sepia’s medicine isn’t ready yet,” she said. “It should have cleared by now. It needs to clear in five slow breaths, and it hasn’t. It’ll be useless if she has it too soon.”

“I’ve been talking to Catkin and Oakleaf,” said Juniper. “They’re in the turret. I don’t think Catkin will really believe she’s the queen until she has proof of what’s happened to Crispin. She feels as if she’d be usurping the throne, stepping into her father’s place while he might be alive.”

“I know exactly how she feels,” said Cedar. “I still expect him to come through the door. I can’t look at the throne.”

“In that case,” said Juniper, “I suggest we send for Corr and ask him to do one more errand.”

“Poor Corr, he’s hardly rested!” said the queen.

“He’s rested enough,” Juniper answered her. “And if I know Corr, he’s still full of the uplift of coming home. Better to send him out now, while he’s still buoyed up. He’ll be honored to go, and only the Voyager can do it. Now, what about Sepia?”

“She’s holding on,” said the queen. “They’re taking turns to sit with her and talk and sing to her—her family, her friends, the animals she taught to sing, all of them. Urchin never leaves her. But the water she drank was deadly. Corr and Crown kept her alive with pure water, mendingmoss from Swan Isle, and honey from Whitewings, but those things can only delay her death, not prevent it. Only the medicine can do that. I just wish it would clear. She can’t hold on much longer.”

Sepia’s mother had talked to Sepia about all the things she had done when she was little. Crackle had made bilberry cordial and spooned it into Sepia’s mouth. Occasionally, Sepia opened her eyes, just for a few seconds, and they thought that, perhaps, she recognized whoever was there. Once, she smiled. Urchin, looking into her face, was waiting for her to open her eyes again, and did not turn around when Juniper came in.

“She smiled once, Juniper,” he said. That was important. If she died, he would have that smile to remember.

Sepia began to shake. Her mother bent over her.

“Is that supposed to happen?” she asked, but Juniper was already running to the door.

“Your Majesty!” he shouted. “Queen Cedar!”

Urchin held Sepia as tightly as he could to control the shaking, but she still shuddered violently. Urchin had seen the earth tremble like this until it collapsed in on itself. Sepia’s eyes were open and staring, but she seemed to see nothing. Terrified, he pressed her head against his shoulder to stop her teeth from chattering. The queen ran into the room.

“How long has she been like this?” she demanded.

“Just started,” said Urchin, still struggling to keep Sepia still.

“Pray,” ordered the queen. Urchin, glancing up, saw her shake a phial. Then she became silent. Juniper put a claw to his lips, and Urchin could see that he was counting.

“Plague!” muttered the queen. Reaching past Sepia’s bed, she flung open the window and called to the animals beneath.

“Pray!” she shouted. “Now! Pray for Sepia!”

She seized one of Sepia’s paws. “You stay with us, Sepia,” she commanded. “Do you hear me? We got you back, and you’re staying.”

Painfully, Sepia gasped and wheezed. Every breath was a battle.

“Hold on,” said Urchin. “Hold on, Sepia. Don’t leave me.”

The shaking stopped. Sepia’s next breaths came in short gasps, as if she were snatching them out of the air. After each breath, there was a pause, and Urchin found he was holding his breath, too. The pauses were too long.

“Take the next breath, Sepia,” commanded the queen. “Do as you’re told.”

The pauses became longer still. Every next breath seemed impossible. Urchin, holding her tightly and watching her face, heard the shaking of the phial again. Juniper was counting.

One…two…

The count was too slow. Every pause tore through Urchin.

Three…

“She’s stopped breathing!” he cried. “Sepia!”

Four…

Her mother slapped her back as if she could shock the breath into her. Urchin whispered something in Sepia’s ear. Then the queen was raising her head, pressing the phial into her mouth, stroking her throat to make her swallow, forcing the antidote into her. Sepia gave a shuddering breath—but she *was* breathing. Her pulse was beating.

“Now, Sepia,” said the queen, taking her paws, “this is made from myself and from Almond of Whitewings and Ashfire. The poison has no power over us. Our love and the king’s love are given for you. Stay, child, stay.”

“Sepia of the Songs,” said Juniper, “love calls you back.”

Urchin's eyes were still on her face. It was impossible that the medicine could take effect so quickly. Without warning, she fell limply in his arms.

He squeezed his eyes shut, turned his face away, and rested his face against the top of her head. He did not even notice the touch of the queen's paw on his shoulder.

"Urchin," she was saying, "that's a good sign. She'll be all right now. We'll tidy her bed and let her sleep."

He opened his eyes and lifted Sepia while Cedar shook the pillows into fresh softness. Her breathing was steady as he settled her down. Her eyes were closed. She was sleeping a normal, healthy sleep, sleeping herself better.

"We've done it," said the queen. "She's going to stay."

Corr went on swimming, sometimes turning onto his back to let the tide carry him, but never for long, because he knew he must outswim the tide. If he had let Brother Juniper see how tired he was, the priest might have changed his mind about sending him, and Corr desperately wanted to do this. It was the last service he could do for his king, and the first for his new queen.

While Corr swam and Sepia slept, messengers ran and swam about Mistmantle, calling animals to come to the tower in the morning. With summer bonnets and baskets they gathered on the rocks outside the tower, chattering and whispering and wondering what was happening now, and why they had been summoned: *—Any news about Sepia? —No idea. Nobody's saying anything yet. Oh, I do hope she comes through. Poor little thing. Urchin, Captain Urchin, we should say, he had her so wrapped up in that cloak nobody could see how she looked. —Prince Crown is on the island, too, and he's hurt his wing. Has anyone seen Corr? —And what about the king? Has anyone seen him? —Yes, where is the king?*

"Nice day for it, mind," said Apple.

"Nice day for what, dear?" asked Needle's mother, who was beside her.

“Whatever it is,” replied Apple. “Whatever it is that we’re here for, it’s a nice day for it.” She took off her hat and fanned herself with it. “Look at that sparkle on the sea, isn’t that a lovely sight? Did I tell you about our Urchin?”

A disgrunted squirrel called Yarrow whined and complained that it was most inconvenient to be called to the tower when he was so busy. Unfortunately, Needle’s mother overheard him and warned him not to let Captain Padra hear him start his moaning again. He kept quiet after that.

Tower animals moved among them offering drinks and little bundles of nuts and berries wrapped in leaves, and trays of fish for the otters. Those who preferred worms, slugs, and beetles helped themselves to whatever scuttled past them. But a quietness fell on all the animals as the tower doors opened.

Brother Juniper came first, then the four captains with their robes, swords, and circlets. Animals stretched on clawtips and peered past each other’s hats to see Captain Urchin in his green embroidered robe, with a fine jeweled sword at his side and the circlet of gold on his head. Princess Catkin came next, with Whittle beside her, and her mother and brother a pace behind her. Mother Huggen led Princess Almondflower by the paw. It was a solemn procession. If it had been a festival they would have waved and smiled, but today there was no spring in anyone’s step and all faces were grave. Even little Almondflower had sensed the gravity of the occasion, and seemed subdued. She was the only one who did not pause at the foot of the stairs to look out to sea.

They stood on the high rocks, a breath of wind fluttering cloaks and robes. Today Captain Padra had no smile, not even the usual brightness in his face that made him look as if he were about to laugh. Urchin of the Riding Stars had a focused look about him, and wore his circlet and sword as if he had been born to them.

“Animals of Mistmantle,” began Juniper, “may the Heart look with love and joy upon us all.” There was a murmur of agreement; then Juniper held up a paw for silence.

“Dear animals,” he called, “you who have known the great love of a great king, hear me. Last night, when Sepia of the Songs lay close to death beyond the mists, King Crispin took heed of words of prophecy. He chose

to do what he had always known he would do. He gave everything for the island."

There was a gasp from the islanders, followed by silence as taut as a bowstring.

"The king," he said, "took leave of us and left instructions. Then he took his love for the Heart, his hopes, and his fatal wound—yes, for he had never overcome his injuries of the Raven War—he took all this with him as he traveled for the third time through the mists."

"No!" cried voices in the crowd. "No!" But they faded into silence, because they knew that it was too late to say no, when the king had already said yes.

"He has left his last instructions for the island," announced Juniper. "In accordance with our ancient rules, his eldest child, Catkin, the Heir of Mistmantle, becomes queen, with the guidance and help of Queen Cedar, her brother Prince Oakleaf, and the captains. He leaves to you Urchin of the Riding Stars to be your new captain, together with Spade the mole. Brother and sister animals, be glad that you have lived through the time of so great a king, and give your loyalty to his heir."

He turned. "Now, Catkin?" he said.

"Not yet," she said quietly. She was looking out to sea.

Urchin followed her gaze, and took the circlet from his head. Soon, everyone was watching. Hats and circlets were taken off. Above the reverent silence rang Catkin's voice as she gave her first command.

"Brother Tide," she called, "Swanfeather, Fingal of the Floods, go out to meet them. Bring him home."

Corr had found what he sought. Crispin had fallen forward in the boat and Corr, feeling it would be disrespectful to move him, had left him as he lay, only smoothing the cloak around him. Then he took the oars and turned the boat for home. It seemed to him that this was the proudest moment of his life, and the saddest—but as he rowed through the mists, he felt only tired and lonely, and he was glad and grateful to see the otters swimming to meet him.

The animals stayed quiet and watchful, some dabbing at their eyes with cloaks and petals as the boat appeared through the mists. Those with restless children reluctantly left, but the rest stayed, making way for Catkin and her captains as they walked down to the shore.

Corr, Tide, Swanfeather, and Fingal brought in the boat. Padra laid aside his robe and his sword, and swam out to meet them. Urchin whispered to a guard, and presently a wooden board was brought down from the tower. Urchin spread his robe over it and watched as the boat was pulled onto the the soft sand.

“Padra, please,” said Catkin.

With gentleness and reverence Padra turned the still figure in the boat, and gasped. Cedar and Catkin bent to look, and tears sprang to their eyes. Juniper held up a paw in blessing.

“Urchin,” he said, “you need to see him.”

Urchin looked into the boat. On Crispin’s face was an expression of great joy and peace that none of them had ever seen before, or ever would again. Urchin placed his circlet between the king’s paws and turned to the young otter standing grave and almost tearful beside him, not knowing what to do next.

“Corr,” he said, “Voyager and true servant of Mistmantle, well done.” And Corr, bewildered, sorrowful, and unsure of himself, was held securely in his captain’s strong hug. “Well done, Corr.”

Catkin kissed her father’s dead face as Juniper took the Heartstone from its velvet bag. Her paw shook a little as Juniper placed the softly glowing stone in it. It lay still, as if stillness must be its gift to the new queen.

Padra took up his sword, offered the hilt toward her over his paw, and knelt. Urchin did the same, as he had done long ago, when, as a young page, he had knelt beside Padra to offer his fealty to Crispin. Around them, the senior animals knelt, and steadily, like ripples on a pond, all the crowd followed.

“Catkin, Queen of Mistmantle,” said Padra, “as I swore fealty to your father, I swear it to you.”

“And to this beautiful island and all its animals, I pledge myself,” said Catkin. “Faithful animals, rise. Please help me to reign as well as my father

did. Carry him in, please.”

They lifted Crispin on Urchin’s cloak to the makeshift bier and carried him to the tower through the rows of kneeling, tearful animals, bearing him to the Gathering Chamber to lie in state. And so Crispin Swanrider, the noblest and dearest of all Mistmantle’s kings, came home for the last time.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ADRA AND JUNIPER REMAINED in the Gathering Chamber with Crispin's family. There would be days of lying in state before Crispin could be laid to rest. There would be Captains' watch, Circle watch, squirrel watch, mole watch, hedgehog watch, and otter watch. Animals would filter past or stand with bowed heads to look once more at the face of their king, lay flowers around him, and give thanks. But for now, Urchin had a little time of his own. He ran up to Juniper's turret and found Needle and Hope already there. Needle was drying her eyes on a pawful of petals and Hope poured cordial into a cup. He took the wet petals from her and carefully placed the cup in her paws.

"I was all right, really," said Needle, "and then I thought—I'll have to make a Threading of…of Crispin, and he was so…" Her voice was drowned in tears, and Hope reached for fresh petals.

"So she came up here," said Hope. "I'll look after her. And I've asked a mole to find my mum, because she'll look after her, too. She always has done. So Needle's all right, Urchin." He removed a petal that seemed to have stuck to his claw. "What the king did was right, and it's sad, but it's good. You can sort of be very happy and very sad at the same time."

Urchin wasn't sure how this made sense, but he didn't want to ask questions about it now.

"I've come for some lavender from the window boxes," he said. "I don't suppose Juniper will mind."

"I'm sure he won't," said Hope. "Especially if it's for Sepia."

"She doesn't know about Crispin yet," said Needle. "It might be best coming from you."

Urchin leaned from the window to take a few stems of the mauve lavender, breathing in the sharp, sweet scent. Thripple was arriving at the turret as he ran down to Sepia's chamber and knocked at the door, which was opened by the mole maid.

“Miss Sepia’s already—oh!” she said, and curtsied. “Captain Urchin, sir! Miss Sepia already has a visitor, but I should think it’ll be all right for you to come in, seeing as it’s you.”

Urchin looked past her and could see nothing but flowers, bright in the sunlight that filtered through the windows. There were pink and white roses, pale bluebells, trailing honeysuckle—so many flowers had been brought that a bower seemed to have grown around Sepia. A small squirrel peeped around from behind a sunflower, squeaked in surprise, and curtsied.

“Hello, Twirl!” he said.

“Urchin!” said a weak voice from the bed.

A tingle of silver ran from Urchin’s ear tufts to his clawtips. It had been so, so long since he had heard Sepia say his name! It was like the taste of the first fresh berries after a long winter. As he stepped through the ranks of flowers he saw that she was sitting up, propped on the swansdown pillow with her ear tufts brushed and her claws clean and trimmed. Her face was still thin, but her expression was brightly, truly, thoroughly Sepia again. She held out her paws and he kissed her gently on the cheek, almost afraid of hurting her.

“Look at Twirl!” she said. “She’s safe!”

Of course she was safe, but Sepia hadn’t known that until now. She had known nothing of what had happened on the island since the night of the first rage tide. Twirl managed a nervous twitch of a smile at Urchin as if afraid that he would be angry with her for putting Sepia in danger all those lifetimes ago—or that was what it seemed like—when the rage tide had struck.

“Yes, you both survived,” said Urchin. “And you were both worth saving. I’m glad you’re all right, Twirl.”

“Twirl made me a bracelet,” said Sepia, and held up her paw to show a rattly little shell bracelet on her wrist. “Isn’t it beautiful? Urchin, what’s happened to *your* bracelet? It looks different—it hasn’t been torn or anything, has it?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Urchin. “Twirl, sweetheart, will you run to the pages’ room beside the kitchens and see if there are any vases left, to put this lavender in?”

Delighted to be doing an errand for both Sepia and the new captain, Twirl ran from the room. Urchin sat on the bed.

“Urchin,” said Sepia, “what is it that everyone’s not telling me? They all disappeared this morning for some meeting or other, all except two mole maids and they just said they didn’t know anything about anything. Now everyone looks solemn—everyone except Twirl—and I could hear crying. Has somebody died? Nobody’s telling me anything. I don’t even know how I got home. The last thing I remember I was in a cave, and everything hurt. What’s happening?”

He would rather have put it off until she was stronger—but if she wanted so much to be told, he must tell her. He took her paws and told her all about Corr and Crown’s rescue of her, and, at last, of the prophecy and of what Crispin had done. Then he held her while she wept.

“He shouldn’t have done that for me,” she sobbed. “Tell me again it was for the island, not just me. Not for me.”

“For the island, and for you,” said Urchin. “That’s how precious you are. And you know—knew—Crispin. Nobody could have stopped him. Not even you.”

When her family arrived, he left her. Anything else he had to say to her could wait until tomorrow, after a night that would bring more healing rest for her and a long night’s vigil for him.

Prince Oakleaf climbed the hill to the burrow where Mossberry was held securely under guard. Before he reached it he heard sobbing.

Mole guards stood on either side of the entrance. Between them, lying on the ground, sobbing, was Ruffle the hedgehog. Oakleaf knelt to put a paw on her head.

“Has nobody tried to comfort her?” he asked.

“Tried, sir,” said a mole. “There’s no comforting her. She never leaves that spot.”

“Ruffle,” said the prince. “I’m Prince Oakleaf. Don’t be afraid, nobody’s angry. Nobody’s going to punish you. Will you talk to me?” When

she did not reply, he went on, “Tell me about Mossberry.”

She sat up, drying her eyes, and he thought he had never seen an animal look so wretched. Her eyes were small and red with crying, and her spines seemed limp.

“It’s not his fault, sir,” she said. “He just went a bit all wrong at the end of things, sir. He’s not well.”

“And he won’t be, until he learns to take his medicine, sir,” said the mole. “You can go in, sir, but he’s already got visitors.”

“He doesn’t still have any followers, apart from this one, does he?” asked Oakleaf in surprise.

“Oh, no.” The mole grinned. “Not followers, sir.” He opened the door.

Mossberry sat huddled in a corner of his cell, hugging his knees, rocking, staring at nothing. Opposite him, wrapped in their warm woolen cloaks, with a basket between them, sat Apple and Filbert. They sprang up and bowed when Oakleaf came in.

“Evening, sir!” said Apple. “Sir, I’m heart sorry about your father, we both are, aren’t we, Filbert? Never was a better squirrel on all the island.” She turned to Mossberry. “Look at this, Mossberry, look who’s come to see you!”

Mossberry did not even look at Oakleaf.

“He’s like this all the time, sir,” said Apple in what was meant to be a whisper. “But Filbert says to me, that Mossberry’s sick in his mind, has been for a long time, and he’s done terrible harm, but he’s sick in his mind, and he’s still an animal with four paws same as the rest of us, and he deserves kindness, so our Filbert came up here to give him a bit of company, bit of conversation, few biscuits, berries, nice drop of my homemade cordial. We come in most evenings, just for a little while, so he has company.”

“We’ll be off now you’re here, sir,” said Filbert. “So sorry about the king.”

Their kindness left Oakleaf almost speechless. He struggled to find the words.

“You are so good,” he said. “One of the things my father loved about being king was meeting animals with hearts as good as yours. I wish he

could see this."

"You're welcome, Your Highness," said Filbert.

"Wouldn't any animal do the same for any other poor animal, Prince Oakleaf, Heart love you," said Apple, wrapping her shawl about her. "And you're just like your poor father, Heart love him, except there weren't nothing poor about him."

"No," he said. "There wasn't." When they had gone, he took their place.

"Mossberry," he said, "you need help. You can have it, if you want it."

He stayed for a while, getting no answer, and no indication that Mossberry had even heard him. Wondering what was going on behind those staring eyes, he left. Perhaps the queen and Juniper could help Mossberry, or the patient kindness of Apple and Filbert, but he seemed beyond all else. Ruffle was still at the door when Oakleaf left.

"Ruffle," he said gently, "go home."

"No, sir," she said. "I want to help him."

"You can't help him like this," he said. "Go home, sleep, have a good meal. You need to."

"Do as His Highness says," said the guard mole.

"And then," he said, "go to the tower, after the king's funeral. Talk to my mother and Juniper. They are good animals, whatever Mossberry told you. Together, you can all help Mossberry."

"If she won't, she won't, sir," said one of the moles.

Oakleaf left, feeling that he had done all he could. But perhaps there was hope. There seemed to be a new feeling about the island, as if more were possible than they had ever dreamed of. He turned around once more and saw Ruffle sitting up, rubbing her face, and accepting a biscuit from one of the moles.

From sunrise, animals came to say their farewells to King Crispin. The Gathering Chamber windows were open, and a cool breeze brought the freshness of the sea into the chamber. Apple came in, dabbing at her eyes,

supported by Filbert. Thripple and Needle came, leading Myrtle and Furtle and carrying Ouch, who was too young to understand much. Furtle asked to be lifted up so she could see the king.

“What’s your best memory of him, Needle?” asked Thripple.

Needle thought about this. “I don’t know,” she said at last. “There were so many good times. What about you?”

“When he first came back to Mistmantle,” said Thripple promptly. “There was no more forced labor, no more need to hide Hope away. He set us all free, and Hope was able to stay with me after that. He remembered who I was, too. That afternoon, I made bark boats for Hope and we felt so free at last.”

Myrtle’s head was full of stars and flowers. She had no idea whether or not they meant anything, but she knew she’d put them in her next Threading.

Fingal took his place at the corner of the bier. He tried hard not to think of Crispin in case he broke down and wept, but he could not suppress the memory of breakfast in the Throne Room with Crispin, as if they had been old friends, and fighting by his side soon afterward. He remembered the king’s warmth and kindness and it made him smile, not weep. At the foot of the bier, Lord Crown of Swan Isle spread his wings and lowered his head.

“King Crispin taught me of two sorts of kingship,” he said. “The king who wants the island to serve him and die for him, and the king who chooses to serve and die for his island. I will follow King Crispin’s way, though it is not the way of my ancestors.”

When the other animals were gone, Oakleaf, Catkin, and Cedar approached Crispin one at a time.

“I’ll do my best,” said Oakleaf. “I won’t let you down, Father.”

“You haven’t really left me, have you?” said Catkin. “You’ll always help me. You must. You knew what to do, and I don’t.”

The queen kissed him and said, “Thank you for every moment. Thank you, Crispin of Mistmantle.”

Hope and Juniper stood in the Chamber of Candles, their hearts too full to speak. And, in the royal chambers, Mother Huggen lifted little Princess Almondflower onto her lap.

“There was once a brave young squirrel,” she began, rocking her, “so bright and brave that he was soon made a captain, and his name was Crispin. He was a fine captain, and so was his friend Padra, who was an otter. But there was a third captain, and his name was Husk.…”

Padra lay on his back in the sea, floating and watching the stars. He felt closer to Crispin here than in the Gathering Chamber.

“It’s been good,” he said,with his face to the sky. “You’ve been a wonderful king. Mind, I always told you your dungeons were useless.

“Crispin, you know what it’s like—of course you do, because of losing Whisper. So I suppose, when you lose someone you love, somebody who’s always been there, it’s like losing a limb. You never grow the limb back, but you find you can somehow manage without it. I suppose I’ll just have to find somebody else to waste time with now. There’s always Fingal. And I’ll keep an eye on the family for you, Crispin. Urchin, too. And Sepia—I suppose you must know this already, somehow—but she came through. I wish you could see her. Perhaps you can. Crispin, hasn’t it been good!”

Urchin went down to the chamber by the Spring Gate. It was his own chamber, but, all the same, he knocked before going in.

“Are you all right, Corr?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Corr. “I don’t believe it. Even though I’ve seen him dead, I can’t believe he’s not going to be here anymore.”

“Mourning is always like that, Corr,” said Urchin gently. “Have you had anything to eat today?”

“Arran brought me a fish,” said Corr, not sounding interested. “It’s all a bit too much, sir. When Crown and I got Sepia home we thought that would be it—all done. Then Crispin…I wasn’t ready for that. Nobody expected it.”

“I know,” said Urchin. “Corr, the first thing to say is that what you have done affirms you as a true Voyager, and I don’t know if you feel like a hero, but what you’ve done…I’m astonished and impressed by it all. I hope you’ll tell me all about it, every detail. I want to hear everything. But for now, I think you’d feel better for a swim. Otters usually do.”

As soon as Urchin said that, Corr knew that a swim was exactly what he wanted. Everything would feel better after a swim. In fact, he couldn’t wait to get into the water.

“Padra’s down there,” said Urchin. “And the otters have finished their turn on watch, so if I know Fingal he’ll be on his way down, too. Oh, and Fionn’s down there trying to teach her frog to talk. Away you go, Corr.”

So the animals watched, talked, prayed, swam, and looked after each other. Water still had to be fetched, food still had to be cooked. And as days passed, they understood what they had always known—that though Crispin was dead, the sun would still rise and set on Mistmantle.

Juniper asked Fingal to row him around the island. The sun was bright on a calm sea. As the afternoon wore on, golden light filled the sky and the animals had to turn their faces from the power of the setting sun. All around the island, Juniper felt the change that had come since Crispin laid down his life. It was as if the brightness in the sky was alive and holy. There was a new freshness, a new clarity and openness, as if everything had been cleansed and renewed. There would be a golden age. Fingal must have felt it, because when they reached the jetty again he threw an oar in the air, caught it again, and somersaulted into the water for pure joy.

“I’m alive!” he shouted. “I’m alive, and I live on Mistmantle! I’m an otter! Fish, friends, water! I’m an otter! Isn’t it wonderful!”

Queen Cedar summoned Urchin to the Throne Room. She had placed Crispin’s crown in his paws and returned the circlet to Urchin, so he was

wearing it when he arrived. Catkin looked tiny on Crispin's throne with Cedar beside her.

"We need to talk about the funeral," she said as Urchin bowed. "Can you come here after mole watch this evening?"

"Yes, of course," said Urchin.

"And we must talk about Corr," continued Catkin. "As a Voyager I think he should be admitted to the Circle, don't you?"

"That's what I wanted to ask," said Urchin.

"Do you want to tell him?" she asked.

"I think it would be more impressive coming from you," said Urchin. "And Lord Crown…"

"We're thinking about 'Honorary Circle' for him," said Catkin. "Or, 'Friend of Mistmantle.' But we'll do something for him. If Father hadn't been sent into exile, Swan Isle and Mistmantle wouldn't have come to support each other so much."

"One other thing," said Urchin. "I had your father's permission, but…"

"Yes," said Catkin. "I know. You don't need mine, but yes."

So this was it. He bowed, left the chamber, smoothed his ear tufts, straightened his sword belt and circlet, and strode along the corridor.

Sepia was singing softly to herself. She was up, looking fragile, but far better than she had only days ago. Her fur had been washed and brushed, and she was taking dead flowers from the vases and putting in fresh ones.

"Oh!" she said, and Urchin realized that she was looking at the top of his head. "They told me you'd been made a captain. Well done! It's funny to think of it, really."

"Let me do that for you," said Urchin.

"No," she said firmly. "I'm not that delicate. And I'm longing to get out to the fresh air. Can we go down to the sea? Don't worry, I won't blow away."

Urchin decided to put off his carefully prepared speech until they were on the shore. They sat on the rocks at low tide as they had so often before, watching anemones and sea urchins while Sepia dabbled her paws in the water. Finally he decided that his speech was ridiculous, and simply asked her to marry him.

Urchin ran up the tower walls and tumbled in through a window of the workrooms, hugged Thripple and Needle (carefully), and ran down to the kitchens to kiss the cooks. At the Spring Gate he hugged Corr, Fingal, Arran, Tide, and Swanfeather, and a squirrel who just happened to be collecting water. He ran up the tower walls to find Juniper, knocked him off his paws with joy, and hugged Hope. He ran to Anemone Wood, where he turned cartwheels, danced Apple until she was breathless (which didn't take long), and finally ran to the top of his old favorite tree, looked over the whole island, and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Lady Sepia!"

In the tower, Hope cleared up a few stems of thyme that Urchin had broken in his leap through the window.

"I think she said yes," he said.

In the workrooms, Needle turned her embroidery frame to face the light. "Looks as if she'll have him, then," she remarked. "Wedding dresses are a pain to do."

"Don't worry," said Thripple. "Sepia will keep everything simple."

They did not inter King Crispin in the vault with the other kings and queens of Mistmantle. It would seem wrong, somehow. They carried him to a clearing in Anemone Wood and buried him among roots of bluebells and beech trees with a circle of white stones around his grave. Lord Crown circled the place three times, and laid mending-moss from Whisper's grave above him. Juniper gave the blessing.

By that time, they all felt that the body they were burying was no longer Crispin and no longer needed, because Crispin was free, and would never wake to pain or sorrow again. Urchin understood at last what Hope had meant about joy and sorrow at the same time. More than ever, he felt glad and grateful for all Crispin had been, and, at this time of grieving, life was wonderfully good. When all was over he climbed back to the top of his

favorite tree, because it would always remind him of one vital day in his life.

Leaving the funeral, all the otters suddenly felt they needed a good swim, and the moles felt the need to go belowground and get digging, squirrels ran up trees, and most of the hedgehogs went to sleep. Hope wasn't sleepy at all and remained with Sepia, feeling he should look after her, even if she didn't really need it. She was safe, and she and Urchin would be married. All was well, and Hope was happy. Soon it would be dusk, time to go up to Juniper's turret and brew up some cordials for tired captains wanting to stretch their legs by the fire, but in the meantime —"Please will you sing, Lady Sepia?" he asked.

So she did.

May the Heart claim you with joy and forgive you with love.

May your heart fly freely to the Heart that gave you life.

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